



*She Seized The Balls
Alobwed'Epie*

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About the Novel

She Seized The Balls is sequel to *The Lady With A Sting* which is also sequel to *The Lady With A Beard*. Though each of the novels is *sui generis*, to fully appreciate *She Seized the Balls*, it is advisable to read the first two in the order they are published. In *The Lady with a Beard*, Emade the heroine gives a code of conduct to her lone daughter Ntube, with emphasis on marrying the man to whom she is betrothed from birth. In *The Lady With The String*, Ntube finds the man nonchalant and marries a non-native. Her mother (a widow) curses her and refuses to take the bride-price. Ntube is plagued with misfortunes attributed to the curse. After much societal pressure, Emade reconciles with her daughter, neutralizes the curse and promises to take the bride-price. On the way to pay the bride-price, Ntube's husband's convoy destroys the clan's shrine thus inflicting another and more serious abomination on Ntube. While Emade and Ntube are looking for the expensive ritual items needed to have the clan cleanse her, her husband divorces her. Emade dies of shock. Ntube is devastated but composed. With time, the community provides her with the ritual items and bride-price to reimburse her former husband, and so consummate the divorce. She reimburses her former husband's bride-price but refuses the cleansing and so worsens her relations with the community. In *She Seized The Balls*, her exploits can best be described as guided by the hand of providence. In a bid to inherit her father's compound and live comfortably, she destroys the old sacred village grove and fells totemic trees. An epidemic breaks out, killing mostly the elderly. Ntube is accused of causing it because of the destruction of the sacred places. She is brought before the clan council several times but she tantalizes the council with her flawless defences. In

due course, she rebuffs her former husband's bid for reconciliation; falls in love with an influential personality and begets a child with him. She uses the man to achieve the building of a bridge across the river that had enclaved the clan for centuries. With her elevated status among her people she becomes the first woman to be given the prerogative to pour libation in a patriarchal society.

She Seized The Balls, tells the tale of the iconoclastic actions of the heroine, Mary Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. Ntube undermines the traditional culture of Bakossi people and breaks through the barriers imposed by tradition on her sex. Yet every attempt to sanction her fails perhaps because of her strong character and dazzling eloquence. She seizes the prerogatives of the spokesman of the clan and debunks patriarchy by becoming the first woman ever to pour libation in a male dominated ceremony. A well conceived and structured novel: interesting reading.

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Chapter One

Ntube, daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python got to the Mission three days before Good Friday – a period her godmother would not have liked to receive a fugitive. It was at the peak of preparing for Easter and many of her godmother's outstation relatives had come to seek accommodation with her in the Mission. The throng of women who carried Ntube's things to the Mission were themselves embarrassed by the number of people they met in *Nyango* Cecilia's house and so tried to convince Ntube to return to Atieg or seek refuge somewhere else. Ntube stood transfixed contemplating on what to do. Her godmother understood the agony and showing the public face, welcomed her and asked, "Have the flood gates been opened again?"

"Mother, they have. The hatchets of the Mbuogmut clan have been once again flung open upon me and I have no choice but to flee from the place. The only neutral place I could think of fleeing to, is here. Unfortunately, your house is too full with guests from the hinterland. Now, I don't know where to turn to. I can't go to Ekenzu – my aunt's place. Ekenzu is the head-village of the Mbuogmut clan. I can't even go to Meket, Ngomboku, and Muambong because the chiefs are involved in the matter," Ntube said.

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, if you won't mind a few days inconvenience, you are welcome. These guests will return on Easter Sunday after Holy High Mass. I can't ask you to return to where you are insecure. I can't understand your problems with the people of Mbuogmut. So, ask the women to park your things at that far corner of the parlour. Make sure you don't expose what you have in bundles. Take

out only what is necessary for these few days. Even Christian women cannot be trusted these days,” *Nyango* Cecilia said frankly.

Ntube arranged her things as she was instructed and bade the women who had escorted her good bye. After Easter Sunday, her godmother showed her the guestroom – an outcrop of the main house with its door outside and helped her arrange her things in it.

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, welcome.

Let me welcome you once again. Easter period is a very demanding period for me. I pray you, if for reason you think I had neglected you by not paying particular attention to you, please forgive me. It is difficult managing relatives from the hinterland,” *Nyango* Cecilia apologized.

“Mother, I think it was the best time God designed for me to be here. Because of the number of people in the house, the prayerfulness of the period and the beehive-like movements, I was so distracted that I forgot about my problems. I forgot I was a fugitive. In fact, I am missing those funny women right now,” Ntube said.

“Yes, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, God has a plan for everything. Those who believe in him never pine away in sorrow. His merciful hand guides them to safety. Now tell me, what has gotten wrong again? Did the people not carry out the purification rites they promised?” *Nyango* Cecilia asked.

“They tried to, but I saw no need for the rites. So I stopped them from doing it. I did not want to owe them any good turn. I did not want them to make of me, the head of the dragonfly they could rotate at any angle. That did not mean that I spited them. No, I didn’t spite them. I know some of them took it for spite. It wasn’t. I was simply frank

with them and so I told them that cleansing me at the time they wanted to cleanse me was like diluting abandoned stale wine with new wine in order to make the stale wine tolerable. What do Bakossi people say? They say that if one breaks the shell of the tortoise then he has not only made it naked but also houseless. A naked and houseless tortoise is of course dead. And can a dead tortoise avoid decaying? No, it can't. All that is dead decays. Only the stupid dead that think ritual cleansing can change their destiny can be considered as avoiding decay. My people have rendered me both houseless and naked. I know I have become a corn – I am neither a scar nor original skin. So, I am unique and being unique, I am sensitive to abuse,” Ntube said.

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, I admire your wisdom. You are the replica of your mother Emade. But, I pray you, don't be that hard. You should have accepted the cleansing. When you have a jigger in your toe, the best way to treat it is to remove it. You would have removed that jigger from your toe,”

“Mother, that won't have changed my story. What I think has changed my story is my present stand – my defying what has hurt me, and would hurt any other woman in my place. By refusing to be cleansed by the most powerful traditional doctors around, by refusing to be helped in refunding my former husband's bride price, by telling the sages of the land that they had a hand in my problems and abandoned me in them, I have accepted death; I have demonstrated that when a wound goes beyond the bone, it is no longer called a wound. I have manifested that, when a dispute goes beyond the competence of a village, and the village takes it to the clan and the clan invites other clans to settle it, it is no longer called a dispute but a war. Ours has gone beyond the clan and I have taken my stand because I

know I am a living corpse. A corpse has nothing to fear. Should I drop dead now because of my stand, I would remain proverbial in the Mbuogmut clan and beyond. Mother, can you imagine the vileness of our people? I am the lone daughter of a once prominent person of our village. I offend my village, so to speak, instead of my village settling the matter on the basis of the facts before it, it invites the other villages of the clan; the villages of the clan in turn invite villages of other clans and so blow up the offence beyond proportion. They put in motion all the traditional agents for destruction in the name of cleansing rites and expect me to hail them?"

"Yes, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, what you are saying is correct but don't forget that the community is always right and that it is wrong for an individual to challenge it. Early morning rain forewarns adventurers. Your mother's death is your early morning rain. She was a charismatic, brave and dexterous craftswoman. She outclassed men in the art of drumming and the execution of traditional rites. Yet because she stuck out her neck beyond her prerogatives (the prerogatives of a woman) they killed her. So, be careful," *Nyango* Cecilia advised.

"Mother, if one hits a shell with a stone and cracks it and continues to hit it, is she cracking the shell or grinding it? For sure, she is grinding it. So, take note that where I am, I am being ground by the Mbuogmut clan; and do you think it proper for me to surrender myself for unjustified grinding? My mother used to tell me that a person who lights a fire does not determine how high its smoke would rise. She lit her own fire and thought it was me who lit it but when the consequences came she was the victim not me, Ntube. In like manner the Mbuogmut clan has lit its fire and thinks it is me who has lit it. I say no, I am not the one. Our situation is now

at the crossroads. Oil-stains will be seen on the whiskers of the dog that licked the oil” Ntube said with defiance.

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, nobody likes seeing stones thrown around where she has a jug of oil. I don’t like the clan throwing stones at you. I admire your determination but I would advise you to tone down. That is your room. I would like you to stay here as long as you wish. I am short of saying that you should forget about Atieg. Stay here; nobody can have the guts to attack you here in the Mission.”

Chapter Two

While Ntube was in the Mission, the chiefs and people of other Mbuogmut clan villages pestered the chief and people of Atieg village to have her return to the village and carry out the ritual for the disposal of the ritual items they had left in the village grove on the day she refused to be cleansed by the clan. They said it was unheard of that ritual items meant for a given purpose were abandoned in a grove because of the failure of the project. Most Mbuogmut clan people were apprehensive of the consequences of indefinitely abandoning the ritual items in the grove.

Sango Nzegge was particularly concerned since he had forewarned the people against making the Ntube affair a clan problem. So, he decided to sound the opinion of the clan and thus capitalize on it. He moved from village to village and ended up with Ekenzu. On greeting the paramount chief of the clan, he feigned deafness.

“*Sango* chief, *Sango* chief, I Nzegge, I am the one greeting you. I say, good morning.”

“*A mue* Nzeg”, the chief responded. “Do you think I did not hear your greeting? I heard your greeting. If I did not respond, it is because I am terribly aggrieved by your village. Your village has put our clan in a precarious situation. I have sent word to your chief several times but it seems as if he is deaf.”

“*Sango* Chief, about what?”

“About the ritual items we left in the grove when Ntube refused to be cleansed by the clan.”

“Wo! *Sango* Chief, I thought that matter died a natural death.”

“Do things that concern the underworld die like that? If we don’t give those ritual items a befitting disposal who knows what plague our ancestors will inflict on us? If you return, please be ‘my legs’ (my representative). Tell your chief that the whole world is expecting him to order Ntube to return to Atieg and carry out the ritual. Let’s dispose of those things and have our peace.”

“*Sango* chief, I shall deliver your message. If people are late in getting up, it doesn’t mean the cocks did not crow early enough. If Atieg people have not harkened to your advice, it doesn’t mean they are not constantly reminded of their obligations. Because I have turned that affair into a sing song in my village some people say I hate Ntube. I do not hate her. All I am trying to do is to save the clan from an impending calamity. I am now going to reinforce my stand with your message. ‘Thank you,’” *Sango* Nzegge said with a nod of appreciation and returned to Atieg. When he arrived, he went to see the chief but was told he had travelled. So, he convened a meeting of the chief’s advisers and told them about the worries of the paramount chief.

“Patriarchs of Atieg, I have called you together to tell you about the storm that is building up not only in Ekenzu but in all the villages of our clan. Everybody is apprehensive of the way we are handling the affair of the ritual things we left in the grove. Let me warn each and every one of us here that a cock that uses its valuable time preening its feathers forgets that it has a territory to defend against unforeseen enemies. Once it is attacked, it keeps the feathers but loses the fight and territory. We may live to regret our lukewarm-ness about Ntube’s affair. Our paramount chief, the chief of Ekenzu has sent word that the chief and people of Atieg should look for Ntube and ask her to return to Atieg and carry out the ritual that would lead to the disposal of the ritual things we

abandoned in the grove. After that she can go pleasure-seeking with her graffi people. The chief fell short of sending the Muankum knot,” *Sango* Nzegge said.

“What ritual things are you talking about? Are you sure the things are still there? I am saying so because I heard that some Ngomboku boys were seen selling the things in the Ngomboku market,” *Sango* Mbine reported.

“Ngomboku boys? How did they get here? How could they penetrate our natural defences? We are surrounded by rivers. Our village grove is right in the heart of our village. Our dogs roam our village at night and bark furiously when disturbed. Our sheep and goats lie along the village and take to flight and frantic bleating with the least disturbance at night and so alert deep sleepers of any intrusion. So, how could the Ngomboku children come here unnoticed?” Elondo asked.

“People of Atieg, the things we have been referring to as ritual items are called artefacts. They are priceless in European circles. The white man values them to the point of adoration. An artefact we consider useless here costs hundreds of thousands in Europe. White men put them in museums and study them to write histories about primitive peoples. Because of their high demand and value, dealers in them are ruthless. They go to all nooks and crannies to obtain them. I won’t doubt it, if we are told that our children are involved in selling them to second parties,” teacher Nzume chipped in.

“To be candid I heard long ago that the Rev. Father was buying old articles that looked like what we are talking about. So, we should not only be discussing the matter here. We should send people to verify if the things are still there where we left them. Our sacred grove is just behind the chief’s house,” *Sango* Mesape suggested. In response to the

suggestion, two traditional doctors who had taken part in the aborted cleansing exercise plus one other person were sent to see whether the things were there or not. They came back with bumpy faces and reported that the things had been carried away. Only despicable items of cheap wood were found rotting there.

“Wo!” *Sango* Nzegge exclaimed. “If what we have heard is true, then the Mbuogmut clan in particular and clans of Asome-NGoe in general, must be ready for the inevitable. We should send somebody to Ekenzu immediately to tell our paramount chief the sad news,” *Sango* Nzegge suggested.

An emissary was immediately dispatched to Ekenzu to tell the paramount chief of the Mbuogmut clan that the ritual things that were abandoned in the grove when Ntube refused to be cleansed by the clan were stolen. The news spread like wild fire in varied versions. Some news-carriers said they heard that when a similar thing happened in the distant past, the clan was inflicted with terrible plagues until very expensive rituals of atonement were carried out. Another version said that when a similar thing happened in the Muetuk clan, precisely when Missionaries desecrated ancestral objects, the paramount chief and most patriarchs of the clan died mysteriously. The emissary delivered the message to the paramount chief and said that in spite of the absence of the chief of Atieg, he the emissary had left the council in session and would want to return immediately to meet them.

“Go back and tell your people to send word to me when your chief returns from his journey. That matter is not an ordinary matter. It requires the attention of the chiefs of all the villages. They have to prepare guidelines before the general assembly of the clan is held,” the paramount chief said and dismissed the emissary. The emissary returned and after making his report, the patriarchs of Atieg dispersed.

Chapter Three

Ntube, the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python arranged her things in the room, made her bed and longed for nightfall in order to have a double measure of compensatory sleep. At nightfall, immediately after evening prayers, she took leave of her godmother and went to bed. Her godmother and the rest of the family understood her problem. They knew she had not had sound sleep for close to three nights when she shared the parlour with the noisy hinterland women and so needed to sleep early. In the morning, the family expected her to routinely get up and prepare for morning mass with them. But to their surprise, Ntube was still in bed when they were going to church. That was a serious breach of Mission ethics. The family went to church with reservations and thought of reproaching her for the breach of ethics.

Upon their return from mass, *Nyango* Cecilia went to find out what was wrong with her goddaughter. Her door was still firmly locked.

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python,” she called and knocked at the door. Ntube heard the knock, gave a prolonged groaning sigh and asked who was there. Her godmother responded that she was the one and asked whether Ntube was not well. Ntube stretched herself up again with a prolonged yawn that vibrated with the strains of fatigue and a disturbed mind. She got up, opened the door and asked whether it was time for morning mass.

“We have long returned from mass. You have overslept. How, you are not well?” *Nyango* Cecilia asked in suppressed anger.

“Mother, I can neither say I am well nor say I am sick. To be candid, I am indisposed. I had terrifying nightmares last night. I don’t think I can even narrate them. Everything is so disjointed and blurred in my mind. I can’t narrate. It was horrible. I was just about having a last minute nap when you knocked.”

“No doubt, I thought as much. The cure to nightmares is prayers. What went wrong?”

“Mother, as I went to bed, my depraved body, still tortured by the events leading to my abandonment of my village, and starved of sleep for several days, succumbed to sleep immediately. But the sleep was unfortunately short-lived. I dreamt I was being chased by masked men and as I ran, the ground gave way under my feet and I started falling through what appeared to be an endless abyss. I experienced a horrifying sucking sensation wrenching my heart from my chest. The pain was devastating and while I fell, I prayed to end the ordeal by smashing myself on a hard floor and dying. How that phase of the nightmare ended, I can’t remember. I got up drenched with sweat, and shivered badly. So, I decided not to sleep again. I thought of calling you, but after some time, I decided not to worry you. I then sat up in bed in order to fight against sleep. But when I tried to adjust myself, I found myself in a lying position. Fatigue overpowered me and once again I drifted away just to plunge myself once more into nightmares. At that time, it seemed as if the Ndibendile waterfall had moved within reach of my stretched hand, at my head bed. At one time, the water tended to lash into the pool below with hailstone-like velocity and rattle. At another time, it appeared as if the volume of water had increased and the flow was being interrupted by some astral force causing intermittent gusts that pounded the pool below with much ferocity, producing alternating earsplitting roars. At times, the

roars appeared to be interlaced with the drumming of the big drum announcing death. Then they appeared to be infused with the cries of babies and wails and yells of adults. I counted five heart-wrenching roars, each lasting for about five minutes. In one of them, I heard a female voice say, 'Hold on fast. Don't waver. Be steadfast.' I peered at where I thought the voice came, my head bed, but did not see the speaker. I called her, urging her to come forth and show herself to me. I told her I desired to see her but she did not answer. At that time, I thought I got up and ran towards the direction of the voice but there was nobody there. When I tried to call again, my voice broke the silence of sleep and I woke up. To avoid another nightmare, I decided to stand up for the rest of the night. I was overwhelmed. At about the fifth cockcrow, my legs buckled and forced me to sit down. As I sat, I tried to alternate sitting erect with sitting inclining with my head resting on my left hand supporting my chin. The inclining position was in fact, bait for sleep. As I tried to ward off a desperate nap, you knocked at the door."

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, I understand the hell you have gone through. Your body is just trying to purge itself of the ordeal you went through with the Atieg people. Your best bet now is a series of novenas. Place yourself on novenas and we shall assist you in prayers. Nothing bad can happen to you here."

Ntube then took a nine day novena prayer session with a three day dry fast. Her godmother spurred her on and helped her to church time and again.

Chapter Four

The chief of Atieg had cut short his visit to Yoke and returned home because of incessant messages from home requesting his return. Upon arrival, *Sango* Nzegge met him and told him about the paramount chief's worries concerning the ritual items, and the necessity to invite Ntube to the village and ask her to carry out the ritual for their disposal. *Sango* Nzegge did not mention that the things were feared missing.

"Why couldn't the paramount chief ask Ntube's aunt, *Nyango* Ahone, living with him in the same village, to send for her from the Mission and advise her to do as the clan wants? Or, was he under the spell of what our people say, 'he who owns the corpse, knots the body? I know Ntube belongs to my village. But in this matter, her problem goes beyond a single village concern. However, since nobody blows the wet-wood fire of another person, if you see someone going to Ekenzu send word to *Nyango* Ahone to send for Ntube and tell her the necessity to dispose of those things before any harm is done to the clan," the chief instructed *Sango* Nzegge.

"*Sango* chief," *Sango* Nzegge sort of snapped, "it seems as if even *Nyango* Ahone is fed up with the Ntube affair. Several people have contacted her but what she tells them is that, 'a small snake that is big enough to cross the road is big enough for its head to be cut'. That of course ties in with what I have repeatedly told this clan. At the beginning of this matter, I said that, if a child is born with teeth and is allowed to live, he becomes not only a wizard, but also a cannibal'. I long suggested that Ntube be made to suffer the wrath of our clan. But the lukewarm-ness with which we have handled this matter, the complicity of some of us, will plunge this clan into

a terrible catastrophe. If we had blown our noses and wiped our hands we would have long forgotten that we ever had a catarrh attack. One day, the people of this clan will say, Nzegge warned us.”

“*A Mue Nzeg*”, the chief responded, “I don’t think it is complicity. I think the simple truth is that you don’t take an axe to kill a fly resting on your head. We have been looking for a way, a way commensurate with Ntube’s offence, and once we have it we shall flush out the matter.”

“Looking for a way commensurate with Ntube’s offence? How will that way be? What way will be commensurate with Ntube’s offence? When a wind blows down plantains we call it a storm. When it blows down the baobab, what do we call it – a storm? Chief, can you cast back your mind on the day of the aborted cleansing – when Ntube spited prominent personalities like chief Esamb’Epie of Ngomboku, chief Epi’Nkwele of Muambong, chief Ediage-Nkoh of Meket and others? Can you recall the poignancy of the scene; does it mean anything to you? And today you look for ways commensurate with the offence? That is what I call complicity. I am scandalized,” *Sango Nzegge* remarked angrily, got up and left.

The chief grumbled at Nzegge’s insolence but took what he had said seriously. He called Sone, and sent him to the paramount chief to tell him that, he, the chief of Atieg had returned from Yoke and would visit him the next day. The next day, the two chiefs had a brief meeting in which they invited *Nyango* Ahone, Ntube’s aunt. They asked her to send for Ntube from the Mission and tell her to carry out the ritual. To avoid complications, *Nyango* Ahone decided to go to the Mission herself. After talking to Ntube and her godmother, they agreed that Ntube would go to Atieg to find

out what exactly the patriarchs and matriarchs of the clan wanted from her.

Ahone returned in very high spirits and proudly told both chiefs the success of her mission. When *Sango* Nzegge got wind of the success, he started campaigning against people telling Ntube that the ritual things were missing. He wanted to keep it secret and thus take her unawares on the day she would want to carry out the ritual. On that day, the hook of her intransigence would stick in her throat. She would want the things to be disposed of; but there would be no things; and the impotent clan would have no other choice but to ask her to produce the things or face the consequences.

Chapter Five

Nine days after Ahone's successful mission, the paramount chief of the Mbuogmut clan convened a meeting of the clan in the Atieg village grove. When everybody was seated, he stepped forth and told his subjects why they were gathered there that morning. He thanked *Nyango* Ahone for bringing Ntube to the grove and advised that the matter be resolved as soon as possible. He said that though he was the paramount chief of the clan, he was in the exclusive territory of the chief of Atieg to whom he would hand the deliberations. The chief of Atieg took the floor and after welcoming the people of the clan, invited Ntube to the centre of the grove.

"A Ntube," he addressed her, "a few years ago, we were in this very grove with the intention of cleansing you. You and all of us here know why we wanted to cleanse you. You refused the cleansing with impunity. We did not take that kindly; and reacting in anger, we abandoned here in the grove, the ritual items we had brought for the cleansing. That was an abomination. Ritual things are never discarded in that way. If they don't serve the purpose for which they are meant, they are disposed of in the most sacred and revered manner to avoid the wrath of the gods. It is therefore imperative for us to do something – to see how best we can dispose of them. To cut a long story short therefore, now that we have assembled here, we shall tell you what it takes to dispose of the ritual items and after that, we shall expect you to tell us when you will be ready to carry out the ritual. That is the long and short of it. I now call on the people of the Mbuogmut clan to tell you what it takes to carry out the ritual."

Sango Nzegge put up his hand amidst the hums and sighs of the audience. The chief raised his hand, pointed at him, and gave him the floor.

“*Sango* chief, I thank you for giving me the floor. I salute the paramount chief and sub-chiefs and people of our clan. I am particularly happy to see Ntube stand before us to listen to the foolish talk we are going to utter to her. I call it foolish talk because talk is meaningful only when the addressee takes it seriously. We all are familiar with the way Ntube treats us. I shall not blame her. I cannot blame her because our people say, ‘It is the flanks of the goat that price it’. That means that, the value of a goat is dependent on how full or floppy its flanks are. Our flanks are not full and that is why she bluffs us. The chief has spoken, but the way he has spoken does not reflect the urgency and weight of this matter. We cannot tell Ntube what it takes to carry out the ritual and give her indefinite latitude of telling us when it would be convenient for her to carry out the ritual. We are heading for another long drag. Ntube has to be fined a cow ‘with a tail’; she has to provide eight rams, eight cocks, eight whiskies, eight gourds of palm wine and eight heads of tobacco. She must also make sure that all the ritual items are there. That is what I wanted to say,” *Sango* Nzegge decreed.

“I see with *Sango* Nzegge. If the children of nowadays were not like the back of a tortoise that is weatherproof, Ntube would not have been eating by now. She would have grown pale because of constantly biting her tongue. I don’t think there is a minute that people don’t call her name ever since the aborted cleansing. It is said that when people call an individual’s name repeatedly, he/she bites their tongue while eating. In Ntube’s case, it is not individuals but the whole clan that calls her name by the minute. So, to save her and the

community from further trouble, we should give a fixed date when this matter should end,” *Sango* Ejome chipped in.

“What other date but a day before the next Ngomboku market day – six days from now? Do we want Ntube’s matter to develop fungi before we realize that it is long overdue?” *Sango* Ekime asked.

“They want Ntube to take some people for enemies. When it comes to open discussion as it is now, they shy away. But behind the screen, they stab her and complain and nag about astral consequences if the case is not settled,” *Sango* Etame gossiped.

Ntube blushed, made a bird’s eye-view of the place and as she tried to respond, she choked and sneezed and blew her nose several times. While she choked, the chief adjourned the matter to a day before the next Ngomboku market day.

Ntube returned to the Mission and told her godmother that the matter had been adjourned to a day before the Ngomboku market day.

“Daughter-of-the-upstream-python,” her godmother addressed her, “I don’t like that inter-pacing of hoofs and paws. You heard me tell your aunt; *mue* Ahone, to accept to do whatever your village people demanded. I can say nothing now. On that day, you should humble yourself and whatever the people say, we shall do it together – you, me and your aunt.”

“Mother,” Ntube addressed her godmother with a voice raff with emotions, “I think enough is enough. My mother once told me that witches and wizards don’t eat sweet yams. You know how delicious sweet yams are. Witches and wizards don’t eat them; not because they hate them but because when they touch them, the sweet yams harden. Sweet yams are sensitive to the negative power of witchery and so, render themselves inedible to whoever possesses the powers.

I shall render myself inedible to the people of the Mbuogmut clan. I think I have sufficiently borne their evil machinations.”

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, who told you that the lowly, especially the women, can threaten an established community? Avoid shooting the elephant in the forehead. People, especially women should not challenge the village; not to talk of the clan. Be careful.”

“Mother, you once said nobody likes seeing locus twice. But remember, people don’t go looking for locus. Locus simply appears and gives people no choice but to see it. And if it appears to a given person once or twice or even thrice, the person should learn how to deal with it.”

Chapter Six

The days had run by without notice but since it is said that she who makes a promise counts the days, Ntube had counted the days and on the day before the Ngomboku market day, woke up early, made her morning prayers and told her godmother that she was going to Atieg for her crucifixion.

“Is it today?” her godmother asked surprised.

“*Wowo*, time flies. I thought you had about two days more. Whether or not, I have already told you what to do. Don’t go there for confrontation, go for reconciliation. Bring your hands and let’s pray for God’s guidance.”

Godmother and daughter stood for about four minutes in fervent prayers. After the prayers, *Nyango* Cecilia wished Ntube God’s protection, tapped her on the back and said, “Follow the light of the Lord. Nothing will scratch you.”

The prayer strengthened Ntube. She left at once and got to Atieg when the villagers were getting up to start preparing for the occasion. Some women who had thought of going to wait for her on the way, and lead her into the village with singing and dancing were disappointed when they saw her already close to the chief’s house, moving to the grove with her childhood friend Nyake. Nyake told her about the gossip spearheaded by *Sango* Nzegge. She said the village was trying to hold her responsible for the loss of the ritual items and if there were no ritual items there would be no ritual disposal of them. The clan would then cling to that and ask her to carry out elaborate rituals of atonement to ward off ancestral curses. Ntube listened attentively, her mind working hard on how she would react if what Nyake told her came to pass.

When they got to the grove she advised Nyake to move away from her and sit far.

The place soon filled up. The people of other villages were punctual and soon, the paramount chief addressed the assembly. He welcomed the people and asked them to discuss the matter without fear or favour. After that he handed the deliberations to the chief of Atieg. He on his part called *Sango* Nzegge to reiterate what was demanded of Ntube.

“People of Mbuogmut clan, I would not have liked to be chosen to tell Ntube what we demand of her, if I hated her as she and some people believe. There is no gainsaying that he who uses a broom to kill flies on the scabrous heads of children is never loved by them. They take him for an enemy because they think he takes pleasure in beating them. To kill a fly, the stroke must be heavy and there is nothing one can do to avoid making it heavy if the intention is to kill the fly. Ntube can never love me because I am outspoken in this issue. I mean her no harm. But let me tell the Mbuogmut people in all sincerity that if they joke, this affair will be proverbial in all Bakossiland. It is therefore better to ‘kill’ one person and save the multitude than to be complacent and destroy the multitude. Ntube is a woman. Apart from the fine of a cow, ‘a cow with a tail’, that is, a cow with no other option, she has to provide things in eights – eight rams, eight cocks, eight whiskies, eight jugs of palm wine and eight heads of tobacco. Before she brings the things, she must make sure that all the ritual things are there. The ritual things must be there. Without them, even if she provided the things I have enumerated, there would be no disposal and if there is no disposal there would be no solution of the case and you all know what that means,” *Sango* Nzegge said and sat down.

Ntube’s aunt, *Nyango* Ahone having heard that the things had been stolen, trembled with fright, jumped into the middle

of the grove where Ntube stood, and bashed herself onto the ground and started crying. Ntube moved up to her calmly, held her by the hand and told her, "Don't warp my train of thought get up and go and sit down." *Nyango* Ahone deciphered impeccable self confidence in Ntube's reaction and calmly moved to her seat. Immediately she reached her seat and sat down, Ntube cleared her throat and bowed in salutation. Then she addressed the people of Mbuogmut clan.

"Paramount chief, chief of Atieg and chiefs of other villages, my fathers and mothers of the Mbuogmut clan, my brothers and sisters, I thank you all for coming to this grove today for us to put our heads together to see how best we can puncture the deceitful puffy skin under which hides the real painful wound. I often heard my mother say that if the scar pains, then the wound is not healed – then there is an under-skin wound. In spite of my attempt to avoid confrontation with you, in spite of my exile, I think our wound is not healed. I have been told of my obligations in a bid to heal the wound. I would have readily accepted them if they were genuinely demanded. But it seems to me as if they are fishily demanded. I consider this clan too prestigious to work on what is fishy. So, I shall want us to examine the demands critically and sift what discredits them. But before we do that, my godmother made mention of the inter-pacing of hoofs and paws the other day, and it reminded me of a proverb my mother told me once or twice. She said if one found an inter-pacing of the hoofs of an antelope with the paws of a tiger in a marsh, one should know at once that the life of the antelope is in danger. If one went further and found a place where there was a struggle, he should know at once that the antelope is dead. There has been too much inter-pacing of my hoofs with your paws in the Mbuogmut marsh and I seem not to distinguish between benevolent fly-killing brooms and

barbed canes. My mother also told me that not all the fingers that peel beans grow nails. Only the thumb grows the peeling nail. In this case, I see only *Sango* Nzegge with the peeling nail. Now that I have singled him out I must be frank with him. And here and now I tell him, that in this case, it will not be the antelope to die but the tiger. I am not mincing words. I say this not because I have any powers of bewitching him, poisoning him or doing any harm to him. I am saying this because I believe he would be a victim of bitten truth. The consequences of buried truth are scary. His role in burying the truth of this matter cannot go unpunished. I cannot read the minds of other people here but I hold very firmly that any other person who is instrumental in the burial of the truth of this matter, and I fall short of saying even the Mbuogmut clan, shall be struck by the wrath of God. People can't be afraid of ancestral curses on wrong premises. Ancestors are spirits. They function on the truth.

Paramount chief, I see three issues in what *Sango* Nzegge has said (1) paying a fine (2) presenting the ritual things (3) carrying out the ritual for the disposal of the things. Now, I openly challenge the whole assembly, anybody can stand up and answer me. Am I asked to pay a fine because I refused to be cleansed? What is the purpose of the fine? Once somebody can clarify this to me, I shall pay the fine. Secondly, I am asked to present ritual items you all bore witness were in the keeping of our renowned traditional doctors before and after I left the grove on the day of the aborted cleansing. Do the doctors say they returned them to me? Aren't the doctors here with us? And finally, who is to carry out the ritual for the disposal of the ritual items – she who refused them or those who are keeping them? If these questions are answered satisfactorily I shall do as you want.”

Ntube's threatening response mesmerized the people. Ahone and Ntube's sympathizers shivered in fear. They had never seen or heard a woman threaten a patriarch like that. The men grimaced and chewed their lips completely confused. There was drawn silence. The paramount chief looked perplexed. Ntube had addressed him instead of the chief of Atieg. He surveyed the grove to see if there would be a hand up to respond to her reaction. There was none. So he leaned to his right and whispered something into the ear of the chief of Atieg. The chief of Atieg waited for a while before he stood up to appoint a nine-man commission and ask it to withdraw to the *Muankum* section of the grove and discuss the matter. He chose *Sango* Nzegge and Ejole from Atieg, *Sango* Epie and Ewang from Ekenzu, *Sango* Sube and Ebonloh from Muabag, *Sango* Ngole and Etame from Ngolo, and *Sango* Elondo from Kodmin.

Chapter Seven

Immediately the commission got into the Muankum section, Ejole nominated Ebonloh, (the young man who had accompanied *Sango* Mesumbe, the old man of Muabag to the *kad*-giving ceremony at *Nyango* Mechane's death. Ebonloh had inherited *Sango* Mesumbe's position in the Muabag council and because of his wisdom and uprightness had become the spokesperson of his village) chairperson of the commission to forestall *Sango* Nzegge's ambitions. Ebonloh declined the nomination and nominated *Sango* Nzegge instead. A unanimous vote however forced Ebonloh to accept the chairpersonship. After thanking the members of the commission for the confidence they had bestowed on him, he asked them whether they knew the significance of the commission.

"The chief has formed this commission to remove the matter from open discussion that could divide the community into pros and cons and thus lead to prolonged debate. It is for us to concert and take a firm decision – a decision that will not be contested," Etame from Ngolo responded.

"Yes, *a mue* Etam', that is one of the reasons." Ebonloh agreed and asked for another reason.

"I think it is because the chief does not want Ntube to bear some people grudges," Ewang from Ekenzu responded.

"Both of you have answered well. But, is it right to form this commission? I believe it is not. That is why I declined the chairpersonship at first. I would suggest that we go back and tell the chief to allow the matter be discussed in the open. It is not right to discuss the affairs of a woman in the Muankum grove. The consequences would be worse than those we are trying to avoid now," Ebonloh advised.

“Ebonloh, taking back this matter to the general assembly would tantamount to condoning Ntube’s superciliousness. You were not here when she tantalized this community with her rhetoric causing renowned Asome-Ngoe chiefs to scurry out of this grove. Let’s not forget that if a fowl is given teeth to chew corn, a bag would disappear in no time. Give room to children like Ntube and all your traditional values would disappear in no time. A person with a hunch back does not move erect. A society with impudent children like Ntube cannot move conventionally. So, let’s do what the chief expects us to do. If a kola nut is too hard to be split with the fingers, a knife is used to split it. Ntube’s beak should be chipped off. The chief has chosen one elderly and one young man from each village in order that we mete a punishment on Ntube that would reflect the ancient severity of her crime and serve as a deterrent to future generations,” *Sango* Nzegge said threatening.

“Waal!” Ejole exclaimed. “Stupidity and blindness have worn a velvety garment. Ebonloh is concerned with the intricacies that surround the place chosen to discuss the matter; not the matter itself. I think he means that discussing the matter here would be reminiscent of incarnating Muankum, an exclusive male cult. He fears that if that happens and the woman challenges the verdict, especially if she is on solid grounds, then the backbone of our revered institutions would be broken. You see therefore that it takes wisdom to draw inferences.”

Sango Nzegge’s ears hummed as Ejole’s insults rent his nerves; making him hear what Ejole said in patches. Anger bubbled up in him, making him swallow hard spittle and subjecting him to a fit of coughing. His eyes bulged while he made a tunnel view of the speaker. His lips shivered speechlessly. He inhaled laboriously; then burst out, “Ejole,

Ejole whose stupidity and blindness do you say have worn a velvety garment – mine or your mother’s? You are picking on me again? Last time you backed Ntube to placate her to marry your friend Ewang-Ename. Did she marry him? Did she not throw your bride price at you with spite? You should be careful with me e? Stupid.”

“As she did not marry my friend, is he married or not? She threw bride price at us, we appreciated her prowess. She scalded you, stripping you naked and you fell prostrate. You provoked whatever insult and degradation she meted on the clan that day. Today again, you want to plunge the clan into another defacing. Have you listened to her argument? Have you tried to understand where she stands? Can you even imagine the porous grounds on which the clan stands? Who is keeping the ritual things? Is it not the traditional doctors? And who are the traditional doctors, are they not the representatives of the community? And if the representatives of the community are keeping the ritual things, why should the very community demand them from Ntube? And you want Muankum to take a decision that Ntube would challenge and make us scuttle out of the grove again in disgrace? You want to behave like the fly that over values its agility and stupidly challenges the broom to a duel? And what happens to it, does it not lie dead within a split second? I support Ebonloh. This matter should not be discussed here. It should not have any Muankum ramifications. Let’s take it back for open discussion. There, the very foundations of our existence will not be put to test,” Ejole suggested.

“*A mue* Ejole,” *Sango* Elondo from Kodmin addressed Ejole. “I think you and *Sango* Nzegge are contesting something this society does not know about. You tend to be at each other’s throat at anytime there is an occasion. Last time you were at daggers drawn. Today again, the same thing.

We have not come here to favour people. The chief has selected us to carry out an assignment on a thorny issue. We should forget about our individual interests and tackle the problem. If we examine this matter properly, we see Ntube at the beginning and at the end of it. So, no matter what logic we may present, Ntube is the epicentre of this matter.”

“*A Sango* Elondo, you have spoken as if you were in my heart. There is no way that Ntube can exonerate herself from this matter. If she did not throw us out, nobody would have known that we were here. She has thrown us out, she must bring us in,” *Sango* Epie from Ekenzu intervened.

“That’s my train of thought also,” Sube from Muabag supported.

“I believe that is the right thing to do. A small snake that is big enough to cross the road is big enough for its head to be cut,” Sube added.

“Since the majority of us want Ntube to bear the consequences, let us review what *Sango* Nzegge declared in the grove and if possible mitigate the fine. This matter would have been solved long ago if we did not blow it out of proportion. If Ntube and her mother were asked to provide things proportionate to their ability, we would have ended this matter long ago. But some people have taken pleasure in what they call deterrent punishment, to the point of making women participate in discussing issues that are better handled by *Muankum*. We should mitigate the punishment and pull ourselves out of that ugly situation. Our people say, when the clapping is too long, people resort to clapping on their thighs. We should reduce the fine thus: instead of a cow with a tail, we can say a cow without a tail (the option of anything else) because the community too carries a degree of blame for the loss of the things. So, each of the other demands too should be divided into two and she be asked to pay half. That would

ease up things for her and she would provide the things with ease and end the matter,” Elong suggested.

“You want to say you would fether a pig in the same way you would fether a sheep? You can’t treat Ntube’s case as you would treat that of an ordinary woman. If you do, you would set loose evil forces upon this clan. If we approach the Ntube affair from an emotional view point, if she is made to have her way in implanting in our female folks that our time tested traditions can be compromised with impunity, we may find ourselves scuttling in a hurricane and not in dew. If we adopt what *Mue* Elong has said, I would prefer somebody else to make the pronouncements in the grove not me,” *Sango* Nzegge said.

“I shall make the pronouncements,” Elong said with a tint of anger, and the commission of nine rose to return to the general assembly. But before the last person got up, Ejole intercepted.

“I see that out of nine of us, two disagree with the decision and seven agree. We shall not say this in the open, but I want to emphasize here that, a terminal disease does not respond to treatment. Let none of us here go chest-pounding himself that his wisdom has prevailed. I say this because; a trap set for the hoof does not catch a snake. I won’t be surprised if we are asked to come back and review our decision. To me we have taken the wrong decision. And of course, it would be an ugly precedence.”

Chapter Eight

The commission had overstayed in the *Muankum* chambers and most of the people were agitating. Some predicted that Ejole and *Sango* Nzegge were at each other's throats once more. When the commission finally came, the people sighed with relief and listened attentively as Elong made the report of the deliberations.

“Paramount chief of the Mbuogmut clan, chiefs of villages, people of our beloved clan, after a heated discussion, we came to the conclusion that the beginning and end of this matter is Ntube. Ntube is the only child of our community who can be likened to entrails that slip between a carrier's fingers. No other girl has ever exposed our clan to ridicule as Ntube has. Although she was betrothed to an Atieg boy, she went and married a non-Bakossi person. Because of that, her mother cursed her. When her stranger husband came to pay bride price on her, his vehicles destroyed the Brook-of-the-Serpent – our holiest of holy, our shrine of reference. As such, she had now two curses to handle. In order for her mother and the community to cleanse her, traditional doctors demanded very expensive ritual items which she and her mother could not provide. This benevolent community then decided to provide her with the things free of charge. The things were brought here in this grove and given to her. But instead of being thankful, she refused the cleansing and returned the things to the community. To bluff the community, she refused to take the bride price the community gave her to return to her former husband. So, at every stage of the matter we see her intransigence playing havoc. If she had accepted the cleansing, the ritual items would not have been abandoned in the grove. You see, she is

responsible for whatever has happened and she should bear the consequences. But since our people say, when a finger touches faeces it is not cut but washed, we have decided to reintegrate her into our community on condition that she pays a fine of a ram with curved horns, and provides half of every item *Sango* Nzegge had the honour to pronounce before we went into private session. 'That is what we have said,' Elong said, looked round to find out whether he had made an impact, and seeing a good number of patriarchs nodding their heads, sat down with confidence.

The grove went dead silent. Some women jubilated in their hearts and whispered to each other that Ntube was lucky. The commission of nine is never lenient, but this was a special one. Ahone nearly jumped into the circle to sing and dance but something held her back. The men had not reacted. The decision of the nine could be reversed. So, she waited. Customarily, the decision of the nine is never debated. The culprit simply abides by it. Eyes turned at Ntube. She remained unruffled. Ejole cast a searching gaze at her and deciphered some wet carbide-like bubbling. Before he withdrew his gaze, Ntube erupted:

"Paramount chief and chiefs of other villages, people of Mbuogmut clan, I think the nine man commission did not understand their mission although it was made up of pundits of tradition. Their mission was not to mitigate the fine. Their mission was to formulate a response to the questions – why is Ntube fined? Why does the clan want the ritual items from her? And why should she be the one to shoulder the ritual for the disposal of the ritual things? Unfortunately, and perhaps for wrong reasons, the commission thought they could flash favour at desperate me and so lure me from the central issue. This, I believe was a misstep. Chiefs and people of Mbuogmut clan, if I, Ntube m'Emad Dione, Daughter-of-

the-Upstream-Python, *e-nyin'asol* (hardened sweet yam) could climb seven hills and descend seven valleys and cross seven rivers to raise money and go and refund my former husband's (Nsahbinla's) bride price to him in Victoria; if I could do that while securing *seh* Ewang-Eneme's bride price which you had given me for that purpose; and if I could pay back what the Ateig people got from Nsahbinla without seeking help from anybody; and if I could ask you to refund *seh* Ewang-Eneme's bride price, and you did, don't you think I would have handled this matter without asking for the mitigation of the fine? Isn't it true that very few people who claim to dance *abon* with two black *elob* can boast of achieving such fits? *Seh* Ewang-Eneme's bride price was put in the same basket that contained the ritual things you are now asking me to bring forth. You took it and returned it to him and he got it. Why did you not return the ritual items to their owners? To cut a long story short therefore, I shall like you to send back the commission and let them discuss the matter as I presented it; or you delegate someone else to answer the questions here," Ntube said with subdued anger.

That unexpected bold and powerful response to a matter considered closed struck the paramount chief and the whole assembly dumb. It created a crypt-like atmosphere that plunged the clan into self examination. Never before had a person, let alone a woman, contested the decision of the nine. What was Ntube up to? Ejole gave a quizzical look at the nine. He cast a long gaze at *Sango* Nzegge (who, while listening at Ntube had cast his eyes on the ground) with the intension of having their eyes meet and so provoke an eying duel with him, and thus remind him of his prediction that the nine would be asked to review their decision. After a long wait, their eyes met. Ejole half closed his eyes and raised his nose contemptuously. *Sango* Nzegge got the provocative

message. It chilled his nerves and gnawed at the root of his conscience. He got confused, not knowing who to attack. At last he chose what he thought was the softer spot – Ntube, and attacked.

“*A* Ntube, *a* Ntube, Ntube, our people say, a second foraging kills the partridge. You again? You again? You have again dared put your hand in the mouth of this clan? If you did not find it toothless, I don’t think you would have dared again. Count yourself lucky to belong to this toothless clan. If it were the Muambong clan, you would have been consulting the eighth traditional doctor. If you want the nine to respond to you, they will not. They will not; but watch and see.”

“*A Sango Nzegg’*,” Ntube snapped, “what watch and see are you talking about? Are you conscious of what you have said? Do you know you have defaced the Mbuogmut clan? Do you know that what you have said is tantamount to shamelessly and ignorantly declaring that this clan is toothless? Of course, you would want to stick it on me. I did not imply that the clan was toothless when I sought the truth. I simply wanted the clan to respond to pertinent questions.

Now, before I respond to you, let me draw your attention to your daughter – *mue* Ebude, my age mate. There she is; she has a father – you, a mother, a husband and four children. I have none of these but an aunt, there she is. Tell me, if your daughter had become a tree with thin bark that produces no wax (like me) and she knew the source of her predicament, would she accept the benevolence of the forces that rendered her wax-less (barren)? I refused the generosity of my clan, if I should call it generosity, because my mother and my clan claim that they are responsible for my undoing. Did you want me to kiss the very dagger Mbuogmut used in stabbing me? What crime did I commit in refusing to be cleansed? By refusing to be cleansed, I simply refused owing you (people

of Mbuogmut clan) any good turn. And this I did, after realizing that all was over with me.

Now to come to you, let me tell you, it is when the chaser runs out of steam and stops chasing that the chased stops running. The chasing ends in breathlessness. But if you see the chased stop to confront the vigorous chaser, know the chased has hit the cliff. The chasing ends in bloodshed. I have hit your cliff. Since you say Mbuogmut is impotent I would suggest that you go and invite the Muambong clan to come and do for you, what you cannot do.

I know your rank in the *ahon* society. I don't belong to any society. But here and now I challenge you to a dance with two black *elob* with me anywhere in Bakossiland. It is not mere talk by a woman, but the substance behind the talk. I say again without mincing words, and to quote my mother, if in running away from scabies one finds that she is being pursued by yaws she should stop running and brave the yaws. I stand to brave you."

Ejole squirmed and exclaimed in his heart, "*I no been talk! Time dong kes,*" (Didn't I say it! It has happened) then he eyed Sango Nzegge disdainfully. Ntube's onslaught especially her unexpected twist from the main issue to her state of being 'wax-less', chilled the people and won for her great sympathy. It created a sort of sepulchral atmosphere that played havoc on the women. They cast back their minds at Ntube's late charismatic mother Emade and broke into sobbing. Some asked whether if Emade were alive, Sango Nzegge would have dared attack Ntube the way he did. Nyango Ahone, Ntube's aunt overheard the conversation. It worked on her nerves causing her to lose her bearings. She bashed herself on the floor and started crying. After crying for some minutes, she got up, held Ntube by the hand in defiance and tried to drag her out of the grove.

“Leave me auntie; I am not walking out of this grove until my questions are answered. What does this clan take me for? Do they know I was once the wife of an Education Officer, then District Officer and later Senior District Officer? Is it because a rat has eaten the hind-leg of my frog that everybody thinks they can trample on me? When I walked away last time to avoid confrontation they accused me of impudence. If I walk away again they would heap all sorts of accusations on me,” Ntube said and freed her hand from her aunt’s.

While Ntube spoke to her aunt, the assembly remained anaesthetized. Not a single soul coughed. All the sages of the land cast their eyes on the ground in soul-searching, reacting to Ntube’s poignant and omen-laden prediction that all those who would be guilty of hiding the truth of the matter would suffer the consequences.

Ebonloh, was particularly touched. He thought Ntube sounded convincing and her over-reaction in challenging *Sango* Nzegge for a display of wealth in dancing *ahon*, was because of the personal gall *Sango* Nzegge had put into reporting a collective matter. He looked at the direction of the chiefs and saw no sign of any of them breaking the silence. He stepped forth, paced the grove to and fro and sighed several times as he contemplated on what to say in order to break the impasse.

“People of Mbuogmut,” he said at last, “our people say a person who does not understand the talking drum says it makes noise. It may be our silence is tantamount to saying that Ntube has made noise. But has she actually made noise? *Mue* Elong made a summary of the reasons why Ntube should be held responsible for the matter before us. He said Ntube got married to a stranger and her stranger husband’s vehicles destroyed The-Brook-of-the-Serpent. Those offences

earned her two curses that required expensive cleansing. To assist her in carrying out the cleansing, the whole clan provided her with the prescribed ritual items. But at the nick of time, she refused the cleansing and that led to the abandonment of the things in the grove.

To me, that is telling part of the story and not the whole story. Before we lay blames on Ntube let us recall our forefathers' proverb; 'He who shares a compound with a stranger sees and hears strange things'. Because of that proverb, because our forefathers did not want to see and hear strange things they never tolerated strangers in their compounds. They made strangers build far from native villages and they called such settlements Stranger-Quarters. At first they, the natives never went to Stranger-Quarters. But as time went on, especially as the strangers sold what the natives needed, Stranger-Quarters became pivotal centres for lots of things, one of them being attraction for women. Let us recall another of our fore parents' proverb; 'Those who share boundaries cut leaves in each other's farms'. Cutting leaves in each other's farms means sharing common blessings and woes. Now listen to my questions. Do we know that in 1947 when we accepted the Reverend Fathers to build a Mission and open a school among us we were accepting strangers to share compounds and boundaries with us? And didn't we know we would be forced to see and hear strange things and cut leaves in each other's farms? Who among us saw Ntube's signature in the agreement we made with the Reverend Fathers? Did we expect to share boundaries without cutting leaves in each other's farms? I consider Ntube as an outcrop of our accommodating the Mission. Our people say, if one is well seated and an elephant comes on and asks him to shift for it to sit, and he shifts and the elephant sits down, he should not be surprised if the elephant

pushes him out of the chair. A foreign culture asked us to shift. We shifted and allowed it to sit with us, now we are being pushed out of the chair and we are blaming Ntube; is that right?

A Mue Nzegge, Ntube has broken her bounds. She has accused our clan of being responsible for her being barren and says she refused the cleansing because she saw her state irreversible and as such, did not want to owe us a good turn while she remained barren. That is a very serious accusation and a determined decision. Before you remove the speck in somebody else's eye, first remove the one in yours. So, we have a speck in our eye. Let's remove it before we tackle that of Ntube."

Sango Nzegge writhed in anger as *Sango* Ebonloh's unexpected revelations gave the matter a twist that was likely to split the assembly into two opposing camps. And really it did. Although nobody spoke, there were signs that *Sango* Ebonloh's speech had split the assembly. *Sango* Nzegge looked round to see if one of the sages would counter what *Sango* Ebonloh had said. Nobody spoke. All were under the spell of a mystical hush. *Sango* Ebonloh paced the grove once more in dumb concern. He shook his head as the drawn silence made him conclude that the guilt of the clan was beyond words. He sighed three times, grimaced and cried out;

"*A* Ntube, Ntube, send people away from this grove. Send away people from this grove. What you have said has wrenched my heart from my chest. Send away people. Any person who says he disputes a boundary with you should take you neither to Mbuogmut nor to Asome-Ngoe but to Mwan-Ngoe. You cannot be a wax-less tree in this clan."

Sango Ebonloh's threat woke the paramount chief and the other chiefs from a deep reverie. They whooshed at his unilateral termination of the affair. By telling Ntube to send

away the people, he meant that she should buy drinks, entertain the people and tell them to disperse. That was of course an act of spite and usurpation of their divine powers. But though they boiled with anger, they sat quiet as if their mouths were sealed with a mystical band. On her part, Ntube considered *Sango* Ebonloh's demand as an indirect way of asking her to pay the fine, so she protested. *Nyango* Ebane an elderly woman standing by *Nyango* Ahone, Ntube's aunt, hushed Ntube down and advised her to do as *Sango* Ebonloh had requested. "A Ntube, see, a person may discover mushroom on her way to the toilet. I believe your painful puffy scar has been peeled open today. You may live to see. That man has categorically ended your matter. He says that any person who wants to pursue you again should not bring you before the Mbuogmut clan or the combined clans of Asume-Ngoe but to the clans of all the children of the founder of Bakossi – Ngoe. Do you know what that means?"

"*Sango* Ebonloh," *Sango* Nzegge addressed *Sango* Ebonloh. "Our people say; before you wear shoes, overturn them to remove the grains of sand that might have lodged in them. Don't say you have just taken the shoes off your feet. You may be surprised to see a scorpion drop out of them. Are you sure you have not hastily worn Ntube's shoes?"

"Whether I have hastily worn her shoes or not, let her buy the drinks and send people away from here. We have chewed the truth of this matter for too long."

Ntube sent for the drinks grumbling. When they brought them, *Sango* Ebonloh shared them according to kin groups. He surprised people when he gave more beer to two thinly populated groups. Then he declared, "I have shared as we share things in the 'night' (in witchcraft). Anybody who thinks he or she is cheated should come forth. Each lobe of kola nut has taken its position in declaring the umpire. I have

shared the beer as we shared Ntube. She has now become a spurred insect that gets stuck in the throat of a fowl. If the fowl would sleep well, let it vomit the insect. I don't like people who chew the truth."

Saying that, he opened his group's bottle of beer and drank it in one gulp. He looked round his kin group to see whether a person would oppose his drinking the beer alone. None did. He belched loudly and said, "I have taken this oath on behalf of the people of Muabag, and let me tell each and every one of us here, this oath is like a dead and rotten iguana, if you see it and take it, you take it with problems, if you see it and leave it, you leave it with problems. Those who like to drink their beer let them drink. Those who don't like to drink let them leave." He put down the bottle and led his kin group out of the grove. While he and his group moved away, the paramount chief and the other chiefs cast a blank stare at him. Some other group heads drank their beer and also left. The paramount chief and the chief of Atieg also drank theirs and left. The chief of Ngolo and that of Kodmin refused to drink theirs and so their bottles were left in the grove.

And so once again, the people dispersed in confusion leaving ritual things in the grove.

Chapter Nine

The people of Mbuogmut clan left the grove dragging their feet with their eyes cast on the ground in a solemn procession. They were in total confusion. Some thought Ebonloh acted wisely in unilaterally ending the matter. Others doubted whether the matter had ended at all. Others blamed the chiefs and sages of the land for compromising their collective powers. Yet others, especially *Sango* Nzegge thought that ancestral revenge would be catastrophic on the clan. It was unheard of that an individual singlehandedly ended a matter before the council of the clan. In the spell of such thinking, the people moved on till they got to the chief's compound.

"The air is circulating around me now. This is a completely new world," *Nyango* Ebane told her companion *Nyango* Eloee.

"I thought I was the only one who has realized a sudden change. I am lighter now. I feel really light. That grove was stuffy and confounding. There was the overwhelming Ntube aura that gagged the chiefs and all the sages of the land. I wonder what they would do if they realized that they had been dumbfounded by some mystical aura in the grove," *Nyango* Eloee responded.

"I don't think it was the Ntube aura. I think it was the overwhelming power of buried truth. I believe our clan has been unfair to Ntube. You see, when truth is buried here, it germinates where it can never be buried again," *Nyango* Ebane added.

"I don't think it is what you call buried truth. I think it is the deep rooted-ness of Ntube. Ntube is not a simple woman. She is like her mother, full to the brim. A woman

who challenges a patriarch to a dance in a cult in which she is not a member and in which she can never be a member till the world ends cannot be taken with a pinch of salt. Were you there in her first encounter with the clan? When she spoke, her words emitted fire. She chilled the assembly. Can you imagine that she ended in praise-name spattering? And you call that an ordinary fit?" *Nyango* Eloë asked.

"It could be an ordinary fit. Do you know why our people say the back of the bow and the cutlass are eternal enemies? The story goes that a farmer stealthily used a bow and arrow to kill a neighbour's pig. Only the killed pig and the instruments were found on the spot. As the village disputed the death of the pig, the bow and arrow were asked to reveal the culprit. They both said they did not know him. So the village asked them to take the oath of the cutlass. It was held that if they hid the truth they would commit suicide by cutting their throats with a cutlass. In fear, the arrow revealed the culprit but the bow hid the truth. And so, till date, that guilt makes the bow an easy prey of the cutlass – the least wound a cutlass inflicts on the back of a bow, the bow breaks. The guilt of our community has weakened us before Ntubé. Whenever she attacks our sages they get hypnotized and confounded. That is the miracle of buried truth," *Nyango* Ebane explained.

"Attacking them does not help her. If she had accepted the cleansing the matter would have ended and she would have been nursing hopes of a new beginning. Ntubé should be about 31 years old now. She can still have children. But the more she drags this matter, the more she challenges the patriarchs of the land, the more she crawls into the age of permanent barrenness," *Nyango* Eloë said worried.

"I believe that matter has ended today. I say so because House-heads have been forced to take oath. Even those who

have not drunk their beer will not escape. You will see; heads will roll in this matter. The kin groups that will refuse to vomit Ntube will all go,” *Nyango* Ebane said emphatically.

“The only head that will roll will be Ntube’s. A lone tree can’t withstand a storm. I feel hurt by the way our people destroy choice planting grain. Ntube is choice planting grain. But see, she is wax-less – rendered wax-less by her intransigence and the unforgiving spirit of our people. Can you imagine the prize-winning children Ntube would have begotten by now? All the misfortunes that have befallen her are caused by the axes she grinds with the clan. I will talk to *Nyeh* Ahone about it. She has to advise her to avoid confrontation with the clan. A chest-striking gorilla invites bullets onto itself,” *Nyango* Eloie said in a choking cough.

“If I were to say anything, I would tell *Nyeh* Ahone to advise Ntube to look for a husband. Mbuogmut has vomited her today. She will have children. I shall look for time and go and tell her myself. See, Ebonloh is the wisest man in this clan. That he became the spokesperson of this occasion is divine providence. I believe God chose him to end this matter. He has ended it. Heads will roll,” *Nyango* Ebane predicted confidently.

As the women spoke, they saw Ntube and her friend Nyake moving away from the chief’s compound. Nyake was seeing Ntube off. *Nyango* Ebane hastened her pace and caught up with them. She called Ntube and addressed her. “Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, I wonder whether you can create time for me to talk to you. Not now. I know you are tensed up but any time you would be free. I can even meet you in the Mission. I really want to talk to you.”

“About what, this matter?” Ntube snapped.

“Not really, but really. I want to talk to you about what I feel about the end of the matter today.”

“Has it ended? You think it has ended? I feel they have just postponed it to a date when they will gather more facts to persecute me.”

“That matter has ended today. I know it has ended because Ebonloh has openly accused the Mbuogmut clan of being responsible for your demise. He has illustrated how you were shared in witchcraft. Each bottle of beer represented a fraction of you. Those to whom they gave more he gave more beer. He has advised them to vomit you and has decreed that you cannot be wax-less in this clan. That is not a blank statement. If it was, why did the chiefs and sages of the land not open their mouths?”

“If that is what you wanted to tell me then what is the need of your coming to see me in the Mission? You have said it all. I thank you very much. You need not meet me in the Mission anymore,” Ntube said and tried to pull herself away from *Nyango* Ebane.

“That is not the core of what I wanted to say. If you wouldn’t mind I shall come to the Mission.”

“OK, tomorrow after morning mass,” Ntube said rather angrily and sighed. *Nyango* Ebane got the message. She knew Ntube did not appreciate what she told her. Yet, though she took the sighing for spite, she was determined to meet her in the Mission.

“I don’t know what that woman wants to tell me again,” Ntube complained immediately *Nyango* Ebane left. “I don’t know what I shall tell my godmother. I don’t know what next to expect. My life is in shambles. I may have to go to Tombel to pass some time with my niece. Before I return, the storm would have abated. My name would be all over the place once more.”

“It would be good if you gave that woman some time to talk to you. She is a very constructive woman in this village.

Try to listen to her before you go to Tombel,” Nyake advised.

“If I create time for her, I shall create for a thousand others. I know my godmother is already aware of what has transpired in the grove and would be waiting now to disguise scolding in advice. She and the rest of the women just think one never grows. Furthermore, they forget there is a gulf between their outlook on life and ours,” Ntube said, lifted up her head and saw her father’s compound. “Ah! We have already reached our compound. See my mother’s hut. It is already drooping. My father’s house is getting worse. I should have been taking care of them instead of defending myself in clan councils.”

“Thatched buildings depreciate so fast if nobody lives in them. For Just a week, the place looks as if your aunt left it years back.”

“I have to cut short my stay in the Mission. I have to return here to smoke them else, they may depreciate beyond repairs,” Ntube said.

“If you return will you live here alone or you will come and live with us and every morning and evening come and smoke the buildings?” Nyake asked.

“What am I afraid of? I shall live here – here where I was born and where I am destined to die,” Ntube responded.

“Live here alone? Then I shall come and live with you.”

“Where will you put your husband?”

“If he is my loincloth, he will come with me.”

“You joke with a husband? *Mami* return to him. You have seen me off so far. I know what it means to lose a husband,” Ntube said and they parted. When she got to the Mission, she met a very anxious godmother waiting to hear how things went on in the grove. Ntube told her the story in patches

believing that she might have been told the full story by some other person.

The next day after morning mass, Ntube was surprised to see *Nyango* Ebane. “Daughter-of-the-upstream-Python,” *Nyango* Ebane addressed her.

“Where there is pain there the hand is found. I have come as I promised. I shall not be long. Just give me one minute. I just want to tell you that if a dog gets out of its compound and is cudgelled outside, it runs back and takes refuge in its compound. There it feels secure and growls with all confidence. You should return to Atieg and take refuge and growl with all confidence in your home village. But you can’t grow without a man by your side. So when you come, take a man. If you like you can become Ewang-Ename’s second wife. If you like, you can marry somebody else. If you like, and that is what I like, you can decide to have your own children in your father’s homestead. That is what I have come to tell you. Who says a lone daughter cannot bring up her father’s dying homestead?”

“Have you finished?” Ntube asked with suppressed anger.

“Yes,” *Nyango* Ebane responded.

“If a dog is cudgelled in its compound and it runs out for safety but meets the same fate outside what does it do? Does it return to lick the hands of its first tormentor saying home cudgelling is better? Furthermore how can a sensible person plant on rocky soil? Do you think any person who knows about me can marry me in this state?”

“I know that is your situation. I expected those questions. But, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, is it strange to see a tree with a bitter bark bear sweet fruit? Atieg is that tree and you are the sweet fruit. Everything will be fine with you. Twilight-of-the-coming-days, take my word seriously. Ebonloh has solved your problem.”

“Thank you. I shall think about it,” Ntube responded sounding positive but actually boiling with anger at the suggestions *Nyango* Ebane had made. She couldn’t imagine herself being the second wife of Ewang-Ename. She could not see herself accepting to marry again. The possibility of having a boyfriend in order to build up her father’s homestead was not feasible. She could have a boyfriend for the sake of it and not for redeeming her father’s homestead. A boyfriend? Yesssssssszzzz; but not within Atieg, nor its peripheries.

Nyango Ebane’s suggestions plunged Ntube into a whirlwind of thinking. She thought of abandoning the hope of going to live in Atieg. She thought if she went to live with her niece Wobe, in Tombel, she could help her Igbo husband run the store and so learn how to trade and sustain herself. That required informing them and waiting for their response before moving. She then wrote a letter to Mr. Okore, Wobe’s husband telling him about her situation in the village and how she wanted to join them in Tombel if that was possible.

Chapter Ten

On the fifth market day of Ntube's waiting to hear from Mr. Okore, it dawned on her that it was necessary for her to go and smoke her parent's houses. Smoking the houses required clearing the compound. Clearing the compound required either inviting people to help, or getting paid workers. She looked at the content of her purse. She still had some good cash. So, she preferred to hire paid labour than ask for help from people who could attach strings to her request.

"Mother," she called her godmother, "I want to go to the market to buy a file and two cutlasses. I want to go to Atieg tomorrow to clear my father's compound and smoke the houses if at all they are still standing. Thatched buildings need constant smoking."

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, you are right. I hear since *mme* Ahone your aunt, returned to Ekenzu nobody has smoked the buildings. They should be moulding now. But for that, I would not have liked you to venture going to Atieg. Rotten meat invites flies."

"Mother, I know I am the rotten meat. The whole world is discussing nothing else but me. She who is rotten meat should carry a broom. I am carrying mine."

"Yes, but be careful. Don't provoke any exchange of words with people. Even if those who think they are aggrieved by your action attack you, block your ears and don't respond."

"Mother, they will be attacking the former wife of an Education Officer, and a Divisional Officer. That alone is something."

"Go then. Don't keep long in the market."

In going, Ntube avoided the main road to minimize the number of people she would meet. She took the bush path that cut through Ndabekem to the market. With that, she got to the market unnoticed. But if she could avoid meeting people on the road, she could not do so in the market. She had to move from place to place to buy things. And as she moved, she pulled a crowd. Young women followed her, singing her praises as they went on and thus invited attention on her. Elderly women asked about her, and when they were told what she did on the aborted purification day and later on, on the day she was asked to produce the ritual items and shoulder the ritual for the disposal of the things, they became so sympathetic that whatever she wanted to buy, they simply gave her. Very soon, she was overwhelmed with gifts. Several girls volunteered to carry the things to the Mission.

Ntube's godmother was flabbergasted when she saw the things brought in.

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, you have bought the whole market. Where did you take money to buy so much? I have all along pitied you for being poor. I didn't know you had the heart of a cat."

"Mother, I did not buy the things. Women just poured gifts on me. I don't know why. Wherever I went, whatever I wanted to buy, they simply gave me. It is only rubbing oil and soap that I bought."

"Thank God you have returned without problems. My fears were that you would pick up quarrels with aggressive people."

"Mother, a quarrel ensues when two people exchange words. But if the attacker attacks and the attacked keeps quiet, the attacker withdraws shamefaced. Silence is the broom that a person like me who is rotten meat should arm herself with."

“Daughter-of-the-upstream-Python, you are right. I admire your wisdom. That is what God says – forgive your enemy.”

“Mother, I can do a lot with these things. I think I shall appeal to a work cooperative group to come and clear my father’s compound. There are work cooperative groups at Nkinchong. If they know that I shall entertain them well they will come and do the work.”

“Daughter, I think that will save you the headache of running after paid workers. Paid workers are very unreliable. Aren’t you blessed?”

Ntube horridly arranged the things in the house and left for Nkinchong to negotiate with a work cooperative group. The next day Nkwele led his group to Atieg and within a short time the work was thoroughly done. Ntube paid the group and sumptuously entertained them. Etame, an Atieg boy met young non-native Atieg boys eating. He scrutinized the eaters, recognized the work cooperative and was furious that Ntube had preferred a non-Atieg work cooperative to an Atieg one.

“Would you have done the work?” Ntube asked in surprise.

“Why not? These people are alien to this village. They have violated our village space and job opportunities.”

“You need not worry then. There is a lot of work to be done here. I need thatch to repair the roofs of these buildings. I need people to repair the roofs. So get your people ready.”

“We are ready even now. We don’t want strangers here anymore.”

Ntube could not believe that Atieg boys could accept working for her. She returned to the Mission extremely happy and told her godmother what she wanted to do. She said after

the repairs of the houses, even if Mr. Okore's response was positive, she would return to Atieg and live in her father's compound.

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, our people say, 'If one avoids dew in the morning she should avoid rain in the evening. I wouldn't have liked you to return to Atieg. I know it is unexciting to live in another person's house. I know it is boring living in the Mission. But I would have preferred you to stay away from Atieg till the dust about your problems with the people settled. It is only five market days. The wound is still bleeding. Your going back would invite the wrath of the people on you again.'"

"Mother, this is the best time to return to Atieg. This is the best time: to say it in my mother's words, 'If the scar hurts, then the wound is not healed'. And if the wound is not healed, that is, if the Atieg people are still aggrieved, then I shall be wasting my time hiding from them because whenever and wherever they would see me, they would invoke the past. They better tell me now what the matter is and if there are avenues for discussion, we discuss. If there are no avenues for discussion, we get to the point of either evolutionary, or revolutionary divide. Agreed, a second foraging kills the partridge. But suppose the partridge is already dead, does it die again?"

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, who has told you that you are dead? You are not dead and that is what makes my heart tremble with fear. I won't like you to have a confrontation with the people of Atieg again. It is difficult to keep silent under very serious and provocative attack.

"My position will be that of wait and see. I shall neither attack people nor allow them attack me with impunity. Furthermore, where will the people see me? My father's compound is well removed from the village. Now that there

is abundant and cheap labour, I shall ask the boys to build a fence round my compound. I shall visit nobody even my aunt. And I shall not welcome visits from anybody apart from you.”

“As you say, your father’s compound is big, too big for one person to live in it. So, why don’t you repair only the main house and your mother’s kitchen? You can use the material of the other buildings to repair the two. That will cost you less.”

“My father died a long time ago. My mother kept the buildings to preserve his image. She was his wife. I am his daughter. If a wife could preserve a husband’s image, a daughter must preserve and protect it. The stable and the pigpen will be maintained as my father left them.”

Chapter Eleven

The next day, Ntube showed Etame what work she wanted his work cooperative to do for her. They fixed the price and the next day, Etame and his friends went to work.

Etame was meticulous. Young people could easily repair houses but not huts. There were intricacies that were the preserve of the elderly in the repairs of huts. Repairing the dome of a hut required the presence of the elderly. Since there was no elderly in the work cooperative, he thought he could get their expertise through intrigue. On the Ngomboku market day, he bought a large ram and four gourds of palm wine and waited for the close of the market when Atieg people would all be returning home. Usually people from different villages returned together for safety and company. When Etame saw the Atieg people ready to return, he led the ram and four girls he had hired to carry the palm wine in their line. The people were surprised by the fanfare he made of the procession.

“*A mme*, which of these girls is your bride?” one man asked.

“Do brides themselves carry the wine of their marriage?”

“Then what occasion makes you buy such a huge ram and four gourds of palm wine?” the man asked again.

“I shall not be the one to tell you. You better ask somebody else if you have not heard that our work cooperative will be repairing Ntube’s mother’s hut tomorrow.”

“*Nyango* Emade’s hut? You will be repairing the hut for whom? Her daughter Ntube, has been banished from the village and she will never come here again. Does *Nyango*

Ahone intend to come and live in her late sister's compound?"

"That is a long story. The short story is that, tomorrow, we shall slaughter this ram at the compound and cook it as a *Muankum* animal. No woman shall be invited to cook. Only men will cook it. Men will cook it, men will eat it."

News soon spread that a massive ram and four gourds of palm wine were destined for a work cooperative that would incorporate any male participant. Participation was not restricted to work only. The elderly who would be unable to work would be welcomed in singing work songs or giving advice. The next morning, Etame was surprised at the turn out. He capitalized on that and instead of tackling the main house first, he tackled the repairs of all the buildings. He divided the people into groups and each group had a building to repair. The elderly and some strong boys were assigned the hut. By evening, the work was done.

Ntube could not believe her eyes when she got to Atieg the next morning. The work she had thought would take weeks if not months was done in a day. Furthermore, not only the roofs were repaired, even the walls were. She stood perplexed and thought of going up-village to look for Etame and congratulate him for a job well done. On second thought and in fear that she would meet with Atieg people if she went up-village, she decided to wait for him in the compound. She knew he would come to see her in the Mission for payment. And in passing, he would likely want to have a view of the work. So she waited. Very soon, he came with a friend and as they surveyed the compound to admire the work, Ntube came out of the main building and hugged them.

"Let's go to the Mission. I have not brought your money here since I did not expect the work would be done in so short a time."

“Our work cooperative is the best in this area. We are fifteen strong. No other group is as numerous. When we promise to work, we work. We owe nobody work and nobody owes us money. People who are not ready with money do not hire us.”

“You are really fantastic,” Ntube said and led the way to the Mission. When they got there, she paid them and promised preparing a work-entertainment meal for the group the next day.

“That work was done by virtually the whole village. Will you prepare the meal for the whole village?” Etame asked.

“I’ll prepare the meal for you and if you like to invite the village you can do so. I know you, not the village.”

“You better give us the money you would use to prepare the meal and forget about it. We sumptuously entertained the village yesterday and I think everybody was satisfied.”

“Where did you get the food and who prepared it for you?”

“We prepared it ourselves. We prepared two *asab* – one with goat meat, and the other with dog meat. I cooked that of dog meat myself, the best I have ever prepared and everybody enjoyed it.”

“Do you say the whole village was there? How did the villagers react? What did they discuss?”

“They didn’t come there to discuss. They came to work, eat and drink. That was all. Only *Sen Nzegge*, *Sen Ewang-Eneme*, *Sen Ejolle* and the chief were not there.”

“Even *Sen Ngoc*, *Sen Eneme-Ngome* and *Sen Elias Mbine* were not there,” Etame’s friend complemented.

“Let’s go back. I want to make fire in the buildings and also show you the trees you will fell for me. I need a lot of fire wood to smoke those houses. There are two tall trees

behind the compound. My fears are that they are too close to the houses and that would require an expert tree feller.”

“You are talking to one. My friend is an Ewondo man. He fells timber.”

Etame then led the way and as they returned to Atieg they conversed on diverse topics. Ntube tried to lure them into talking about her problem with the Atieg people but the boys tended to know nothing about it. They had heard about a certain woman who had defied the village but that had meant nothing to them. Although the elderly did grumble about it, it never bothered the young. When they got to the compound, Ntube showed them the two trees, made fire in the houses and asked the boy when he thought he would fell the trees.

“I am going to my house now for my axe. By evening, the tree, that big one will be down. I’ll make it fall that way,” he said, pointing.

“How much shall I pay you for the two trees?”

“You have become our big sister. Whatever you have.”

“OK. Go on. I shall see. Please do all in your power to avoid the houses. Let the tree fall that way, towards the ancient grove.”

“I shall do my best. I shall come back in the evening. By late evening, that tree will be down. That very tall one may hit the ancient grove,” the boy remarked and they left for their respective homes.

That firm promise enticed Ntube to stay on and witness the felling of the tree. She did not wait for long. The boy brought two other friends with well sharpened axes. They started work immediately and by evening, they succeeded in felling the big tree. Its crown fell into the ancient or defunct grove destroying most of it. The next day, they felled the other tree too.

Ntube appreciated their hard work and asked whether they would also chop up the trees into fire wood.

“Big sister that is the work of women. Men fell trees and women chop them up into fire wood. There are women work cooperatives you can contact. They will cut the trees into logs and split the logs into fire wood. Do you want me to arrange for one for you?”

“Yes, if the women will do it.”

“Nye Mesang’s work cooperative will do it,” the boy said and went and arranged for the group to do the work.

Ntube was particularly happy with the way things went. Men and women simply worked as if some astral force spurred them on. She had tried to avoid contact with the people but Etame’s exploits had made indirect and positive contacts. The women’s cooperative also worked well and she paid them handsomely. Although the fire wood was not far from the house, she asked Etame to get some boys and have the cumbersome pieces stacked by the stable and the well cut ones stacked at the veranda of the main building. Some of the light ones she herself stacked in the ceiling of the kitchen for future use. Every day, she went to Atieg twice to smoke the buildings. On the third week, she told her godmother that it was too tasking going to Atieg twice a day to smoke the buildings. She thanked her for her saintly kindness and said she would return to Atieg the next day.

Chapter Twelve

Ntube had wanted to sneak into Atieg un-noticed. But the work on the houses, especially the repairs of the dome of her mother's hut, and the felling of the trees had publicized her imminent return. The young women who had assisted her carry things to the Mission were bustling with desire to give her a heroine's return. They had arranged themselves in dance groups and composed songs. Each dance group was assigned to cook a special dish. The boys who had worked on the houses and felled the trees opted to provide wine. When Ntube sent word that she wanted a few girls to help her carry things from the Mission, nearly every young woman turned up.

"Daughter-of-the-upstream-Python, your whole village has turned up to carry your things. Most of them will return without carrying anything. Tell them not to make noise. I believe the Rev. Father is taking his siesta. Let them carry the things and return quietly," Ntube's godmother advised.

The children carried the things in silence and tiptoed from the Mission leaving Ntube behind to receive her godmother's advice. Immediately they reached the big field a good distance away from the Reverend father's house, they broke into song and dance, and took the shorter road of the stepping stones. After crossing the river, they waited for Ntube at the Brook-of-the-Serpent. Ntube was long in coming. So, the children resorted to playing. They played *mbang* a shuttling of the feet game. As they played, they trampled the place, and very soon created a convenient dance spot. Immediately Ntube arrived, they encircled her in the spot and danced *mbensu* a female dance round her. She joined the dance simply to complement what she thought was a

childish pantomime. But once she took a dance step, Diele the lead singer's voice opened with a strange overpowering vibrancy. As the voice echoed in the vicinity increasing in power and charm, Ntube danced with more enthusiasm than the children had expected. Diele sang eight songs and was just about ululating to end the dance, when Same jumped in and intoned the ninth song, a male-dance song, and made the group dance the ninth round *ebenẓu* dance, a male dance; then he ululated and ended the dance. Some elderly girls frowned at that breach of convention. Only eight songs and eight rounds of dancing were necessary for a female occasion. The ninth song and ninth round of dancing, especially dancing *ebenẓu*, a male dance gave the occasion a male character which the girls did not like. They protested and warned the boys against further breaches.

“What do you call breach of convention in this case? Can we think of a precedence of this situation? What is the name of this place? Isn't it called Brook-of-the-Serpent? Is Brook-of-the-Serpent a male or female place? If in violating male overtones of a male place I complement with a male song and dance to validate what you have ignorantly done, you pucker your faces as if you have seen overnight excrement? Do you know what it means to carry *essim'abon* (tabernacle of ahon)?” Same asked with a voice tinged with rebuke.

“*Mua lo nen* (small fellow) you always claim to be all knowing. You are once again exposing your witchcraft. Who do you think you want to frighten, me? This place ceased being a male place the day female vehicles, sister Ntube's vehicles destroyed it. If not, show me anything that recalls the male-ness of the place,” Diele retorted strongly, expecting some sort of hug from Ntube.

Ntube sulked at the exchange of words. Same's pronouncements triggered old disgustful feelings about the

place in her. Her mind opened. Same had hinted of some astral implication in the dancing. He implied that she was carrying *essim'abon*. Was that going to open another gash in her life? Was the dancing not the machinations of astral forces? For sure, some mystical forces had lured her into the dance. Yes, they had. How was it that she could not recognize the Brook-of-the-Serpent? How was it that she plunged herself into dancing and danced so enthusiastically without thought? She sighed, shook her head and told the procession to move from there. "This is not where we would have danced," she said in a broken voice. "We would have gone right home and not here at the Brook-of-the-Serpent. You all know what it means to me and to all of you. Let's go and sort out our differences at home." With that, the procession left the Brook-of-the-Serpent in low spirits. The singing lost its vibrancy in solo and refrain.

Diele's singing at the Brook-of-the-Serpent had echoed with great and enticing effervescence in the village subjecting the women cooking assigned foods in the village to a fit of dancing. Some abandoned the cooking and rushed to wait for the procession at the entrance of Ntube's compound. Then the singing stopped abruptly. That did not worry them because it sometimes happens that the lead singer gets exhausted or runs out of songs and briefly stops to regain lost energy or recall more animating songs. So the women waited. After a brief wait, they saw a downcast procession approaching the compound. The earlier pulsating singing had turned into discordant croaks. Ntube looked sullen and depressed.

"What is the matter? Did any of you fall at the Brook-of-the-Serpent?" the dumbfounded women asked almost in unison.

“It is the uppishness of Same. He broke the convention. He sang a male song in a female occasion and so, sister Ntube got angry”, one of the girls responded.

“Is that why you have turned a joyous procession into a sepulchral one?” the women asked and sighed with disappointment.

“Who cares about counting the number of songs and rounds of dancing these days?” Nzole’s mother asked and added, “See, we had expected to join the procession, and in pomp and pageantry, escort Ntube into her compound. But here we are – at an anticlimactic end.”

“If people fail to sing, stones would” Ebate said and asked Edibe, one of her friends with whom she had rushed to the place to lead in singing. Edibe was a fair weather singer. She tried to croak a song but lost her voice. She tried another, same results, and then gave up. Within that time Ntube entered the house and slumped into a wooden sofa with a throbbing headache. She soon dozed off. The women allowed her sleep though they thought her sleep would work against the pageantry of the occasion.

Ntube was not long in sleep when she was subjected to nightmares reminiscent of those she related to her godmother in her early days in the Mission. She thought she was by the side of *Ndibendile* (the great pool) feared to be inhabited by *maminwater* (mermaid). She thought the water from the waterfall pounded the pool with great ferocity and the resultant noise was interlaced with the drumming of the big drum announcing death. Then she thought she heard the distinctive voice of her mother Emade tell her, “Don’t falter, stand firm, and brave the storm.” Then she peered at where the voice came from but could not see her mother. In a frantic search for her, she fell in a ditch and on trying to jump

out she got up with a start. She got up drenched with sweat. After a prolonged yawn, she asked for Diele. Diele came.

“Why is the place so quiet?”

“Because we wanted you to rest properly. You were exhausted. Should I animate the place?”

“Yes. You should.”

Diele moved to her mother, seized her head-tie and made a waistband out of it. She tied the band round her waist and after reinforcing herself with the waistband, she yelled. Her shrill voice tore through the surrounding hills delivering the message to all and sundry. She yelled again and raised her hands to an expectant crowd. The boys understood the type of dance she envisaged from tying the waistband, and got the drums. The girls on their part, rushed to tie waistbands. While they did so, Diele yelled again. The lead drummer hit the introductory notes of the *ngone* dance (a mixed male and female dance) and stopped abruptly. The trying rhythm coursed through the thrilled attendants and subjected them into dance skirmishes. But they, stopped abruptly to replicate the drummer. Diele got the message. The people were ready to dance and had to be spurred by a leader. In response she yelled again. The musicians picked up from the yell and rent the compound with sweet powerful music. The compound exploded in song and dance. For one hour, Diele held people spellbound with her angelic voice. Her voice broke all sound barriers as it echoed in all Mbuogmut clan villages. Able-bodied men and women from the villages rushed to Atieg to find out for themselves what was happening at Atieg once more. But as they came, they simply joined in the dancing without asking the *raison d'être*.

After the one hour nonstop dancing, an ecstatic Ntube asked the women groups to entertain the people. The food she saw the women bring was beyond expectation. Apart

from Eduke, *Sango* Nzegge's wife, all the women of Atieg brought food. In like manner, most young men brought in palm wine. Ntube herself complemented with beer. Everything was in abundance. After eating and drinking, Ntube encouraged the attendants to carry home the leftover to those who could not attend. She herself sent lots of things to her godmother and her aunt Ahone. All in all, as it was later reported, even those who did not attend the occasion ate and there were still remains.

Chapter Thirteen

Unlike other occasions of abundance in which the attendants insisted on dancing till daybreak, once the feasting ended in this, the population started dispersing. Six women volunteered to keep watch over Ntube. They were suspicious of the patriarchs of the land. Though the men had manifested full satisfaction at the end of the ceremony, the women did not trust them. Furthermore, the women thought loneliness could have adverse consequences on Ntube. The compound was vast and far removed from the main village. When the women revealed their intention to her, she thanked them but advised the married ones to return to their husbands. The three married ones returned.

Ntube made up the beds and after a few pastime folktales with the women they went to bed. Just when the first signs of dozing set in, there was a terrible bang on the roof of the house. The women woke with a start and scurried to the parlour. Ntube heard them and met them in the parlour.

“What might have happened? I thought a tree had fallen on the roof,” one of the women said.

“I think somebody threw a heavy object on the roof. We can’t trust the men of this clan. They have done it to frighten us,” the second woman speculated.

“It is one of the nocturnal birds swooping to catch a bat or an insect that missed and crashed,” Ntube dismissed the fears of the guards and asked them to go to bed. They returned to their respective beds but before long, there was a more horrifying bang, followed by intense fluttering of bats and insects interlaced with the odious hooting of apparently two owls in a gigantic tree opposite the compound just where

the road forked out into the road of the hammock, and the road of the stepping stones.

Hooghongou, hooghongou, hunoo

Houiii

Hooghongou, hooghongou, hunoo

Houiii

The apparent male owl hooting solo, and female owl hooting chorus went on and on creating an eerie atmosphere. The guards' hearts jumped into their mouths. "This is plain male witchcraft", they said in their hearts as the zooming fluttering and the hooting intensified, keeping them ill at ease. At a certain point, Ntube unable to bear the disturbance anymore woke up and stealthily went to the kitchen and got a glowing piece of firewood, tiptoed to the road and with all her might hauled the fire at the hooting owls. Although it fell short of reaching the tree, the thousands of fire sparks it spread frightened the owls and they flew away. Even the fluttering abated. A tranquil moment ensued and the women guards now overwhelmed by fatigue and anxiety succumbed to sleep.

In the morning, they got up with nerves stretched to breaking point. They met in the parlour and waited for Ntube. When she came they observed her keenly. She was unruffled by the night's disturbances. She greeted them and asked them how they slept.

"It was a dreadful night. I think your enemies came to display their night strength. I slept very late, when the bashing and fluttering abated," the first guard said.

"I have always said that men are treacherous. The men who manifested the power of witchcraft last night, are the very ones who sang our praises yesterday when we were feeding them. To show that we are also tough, we should look for a traditional medicine man to neutralize them. I

suggest that we go for *Sango* Nsunlid of Ediengo. Although Ediengo is far, I opt to go there,” the second guard said.

“There is a man at Konye, a Bakundu man, they call him rat poison because of the way his *epume* (a talisman that kills wizards) is effective. If we invite that man here, and he sets his *epume*, we shall see. Any person who dares it again, any person who sticks out his neck again to transform himself, will die. Konye is not far. Konye is motor-able. Let’s go there instead of Ediengo,” the third guard suggested.

Ntube perfidiously smiled and asked whether the guards meant business.

“We mean business. If the men won’t allow us sleep, we should not allow them sleep,” the first guard said firmly.

“Suppose you set *epume* and all of them die?” Ntube asked.

“That will serve them right,” the first guard responded.

“Do you know what it means to lose a husband? Suppose their relatives set *epume* against those who killed their fathers or husbands and we all die?” Ntube asked lightheartedly.

“That is not possible,” the guards responded in unison.

“Let me tell you, my mother used to say, ‘A winged insect does not die in a fight between two elephants’. We should have nothing to fear when our sages fight among themselves. If they think they are fighting us, they would be mistaking. The fight is among them. Those who transform themselves into owls acknowledge defeat in open combat. And those who are defeated in the day can’t win in the night,” Ntube said reassuringly.

“Though we are talking as if it is the whole clan, I believe it is *Sango* Nzegge and his wife who have transformed themselves,” the first guard said.

“I also think so. They are male and female owls and no other couple sounds like the owls,” the second guard supported.

“We are all strangers here. Let’s leave that and see how best we can provide ourselves with food this morning,” Ntube suggested.

“My mother said she would bring you cocoyam. I believe she has gone to the farm. *Aha!* There she is, coming,” the third guard said as her mother came in with a heavy basket of cocoyam.

“*A nye*, Eban’,” Ntube addressed *Nyango* Ebane (the woman who had advised her to return to Atieg and look for a man and rebuild her father’s homestead) “did you sleep in the farm? The cocoyam looks as if they were harvested this morning. Thank you very much.”

Nyango Ebane entered the kitchen with the basket and the first guard helped her put the basket down. After a while, the guard spread the cocoyam on the ground to select the ones for the morning meal.

“You need not spread the cocoyam. It is choice cocoyam. Tell the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, as she eats the cocoyam she must preserve some under her bed,” *Nyango* Ebane said with a drawn and noisy exhalation.

“She is here herself,” the young guard responded. Ignorant of proverbial language she got the cocoyam she thought would suffice for the morning meal and tried to carry the rest to spread under Ntube’s bed. Ntube stopped her and told her that *Nyango* Ebane meant that she (Ntube) should not eat the cocoyam alone or with women alone. She should eat some and preserve some for a choice man – a man with whom she would sleep on the bed after eating the cocoyam.

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, you are not a child. That is what I mean. You are full to the brim. You

understand Bakossi. That is the long and short of it. Nothing will shake you here in your father's compound. After the rain, the rainbow and after the rainbow, the sun," *Nyango* Ebane said and returned with overt joy.

Other women sent or brought in cooked food. So, there was no need for Ntube and her guards to cook that day. The next day, two women sent two bunches of plantains and three sent cooked food. Thus, for the three days that the first contingent of guards stayed with her, they did not cook. Although they did not cook, a mysterious force made them pay special attention to the cocoyam brought in by *Nyango* Ebane. Every morning they, following Ntube's instructions, spread them in the sun to keep them dry for prolonged keeping. The cocoyam was *binage*, the pinkish type – a hardy type whose delicacy lies in either being cooked or roasted and eaten with palm oil, or cooked as *mesise me mbange* (pudding). Ntube admired the cocoyam and time and again gave a disparaging smile at the significance of spreading them under her bed. She drew reminiscences from the way pudding is prepared, and the way it is eaten. Pudding is a lovers' dish, especially and affianced couple. And as a lovers' dish, it is laced with first grade glittering palm oil which makes it exquisite to behold.

To prepare it, the cocoyam are peeled and sliced into appropriate pieces and cooked. When the pot is at the initial stage of boiling, they add salt, crayfish and other ingredients then lace it with palm oil. Once the pot is ready, they empty it into a large bowl or basin and shuttle or whip the cocoyam in the bowl until an appreciable thickness of the pudding is obtained. Then they lace it again with palm oil and serve it. Until recently, pudding was eaten with bare hands in a common bowl. Ntube juxtaposed the similarities of the preparation and eating of pudding with other human activities

and laughed at what she thought was *Nyango* Ebane's wishful thinking.

On the third day, the first batch of guards ended their turn. In handing over to the next, they narrated their experiences – the breathtaking banging of objects on the roof, the frightful fluttering of bats, the hooting of owls and Ntube's undaunted spirit. This became routine as batch after batch handed over to the next. And as batch after batch handed over so did the news spread that Ntube's compound was haunted. While some detractors thought it was the beginning of ancestral revenge on her, most women thought the men were behind the unfortunate situation.

Chapter Fourteen

The aggrieved women, especially *Nyango* Ebane thought of asking the chief to rally the village in the grove to discuss the matter. On second thought however, they decided to meet Ntube and suggest a series of counter measures to handle the situation – a backup force of elderly women, a squad of boys, or a temporary abandonment of the compound till it was secured by talisman buried at different corners by traditional doctors. When the women met Ntube and made the proposals, she laughed and told them that she did not see anything abnormal with what was happening in her compound.

“The guards are afraid of birds and insects. Tomorrow is Ngomboku market day. I shall solve that problem tomorrow,” she said.

“How do you solve a problem with the invisible? What is happening in this compound has already been given a name and whatever is given a name falls within human experience and manipulations. My stand in the matter is that, we counter witchcraft with witchcraft,” *Nyango* Eloë suggested.

“OK, if you want to re-enforce the guards with elderly women who can counter witchcraft with witchcraft, do so,” Ntube said to end the conversation. In the evening, three elderly women came along. That night, nature went wild. The next day was Ngomboku market day. Ntube went to the market and bought twelve fowls and two cats. In the evening, she lit two bush lamps and hung them on low poles some distances away from the house and released her fowls and cats there. As the insects fluttered around the lamps and fell on the ground, the fowls feasted on them. The cats on their part caught whatever bat or large insect flew low. The owls

unused to that scenario hooted discretely thus creating a conducive atmosphere for sleep. The elderly women could not believe that they were in the same compound.

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, you have been to this world twice. I don’t think you are working on first experience. But how far will you go with this method of controlling the fluttering, the clanging noise of bats and the hooting of owls? Kerosene costs so much. Will you be able to light your lamps round the year? And what about your fowls, will they only eat insects?” *Nyango Mesinze* asked.

“Before I run out of kerosene, there will be neither bats, insects nor owls. The owls that hoot in those trees would seek asylum in other villages of the Mbuogmut clan,” Ntube responded with a cynical smile.

“Those are were-owls – owls possessed by human beings and used as agents of witchcraft. Will their owners remain here while the owls go on exile?” one of the women asked.

“If they are were’owls, their owners or the people who transform into them will choose where to be,” Ntube responded lightheartedly.

The elderly women stared at each other, grimaced at the response and concluded that Ntube appreciated guards for company rather than for protection. So, they decided to return to their respective homes leaving the young guards with her. When they had gone, Ntube sent for Etame and told him to rally his work cooperative and fell all the trees of the defunct grove – the grove which the village abandoned when Emade, Ntube’s mother refused to move compound upon her husband’s death. Etame’s work cooperative cleared the whole place and felled the trees. Then women work cooperatives chopped them up into firewood and stacked the wood in the stable. What they could not carry they set ablaze. Ntube’s compound now stood in the open and only the huge

tall buma tree at the road junction provided a haven for any winged creature that had survived the fire. For several days the fire smouldered on – producing a thick suffocating smudge that acted as an insecticide, driving away the insects that had survived the flames.

The bats moved onto the buma tree and perched in apparently family but discordant clusters within which intermittent quarrels broke out, skirmishes and even real fights ensued, resulting in the weaker ones scurrying away in fright, but soon flew back for reconciliation; were cordially welcomed; just for another skirmish to send them scurrying away again with even louder disgruntled earsplitting clangs. With the noise now concentrated on one tree – a tree that overlooked the whole village, the clangorous noise became more high pitched and therefore more infuriating not only to Ntube but to the whole village. Unlike the owls that hooted only at night, the bats clanged day and night. Ntube felt like dissolving in shame as none of her strategies seemed to work against the bats. She had beaten the more boding evil agents of witchcraft – the owls. They had gone in fear of the smouldering surroundings but the bats stayed on.

The bats had become a formidable menace. They did not only make noise, they littered the road branches with thick droppings. Some people, especially old women who dared the road in the morning slipped and fell in the mess. While the population complained and cursed, Ntube tried to think things over. Two principal solutions vied for prime of place in her mind. She thought she could repair her father's rusted *dane* gun and hire a person to shoot the bats, and if that did not work, she would fell the tree and render the bats homeless – having no place to perch. And if they did not have a place to rest, they would be forced to either keep flying or seek asylum in the forest where they belonged.

Those that proved intransigent would get tired and become easy prey to the cats and people who ate them.

One Friday evening at about 4 o'clock, she decided to carry the *dane* gun to a blacksmith at Nkinchong. She sent one of her guards to call Etame to help carry the gun. Unfortunately, the guard did not meet Etame at home. He had gone to Nkinchong.

"OK, if he is not at home, carry the gun and let's go to Nkinchong. If we meet him there we shall tell him to bring back the gun if it is repaired," Ntube told the guard.

"Women neither carry nor shoot guns in Bakossiland. If my mother hears that I carried a gun, she will be very angry with me," the guard responded.

"I have not said we are going on a hunting expedition. We are going to repair the gun," Ntube said angrily.

"No, I shall not carry the gun. I can accompany you to Nkinchong but I shall not carry the gun. I have never seen a woman carry a gun," the guard responded emphatically.

"You need not accompany me. I shall carry the gun myself," Ntube snapped, got the gun, balanced it in her hand and set off, taking the road of the hammock. By the time she got to the hammock, her hand was numbed. She managed and crossed the hammock and leaned the gun against a tree trunk and rested. Then she remembered how her father used to carry the gun. After resting, she carried the gun on her shoulder and that eased her up. She now moved more conveniently. Before she got to the main road, she saw a woman coming, carrying a very heavy basket of cocoyam on her back. The woman had lifted up her head and seen a person carrying a gun. Although she saw the person dressed like a woman, she greeted the person:

"*A Sango de bomeh?*" (Mr. have we met?)

“*A Nye Eban, me Ntube, me nnde.*” (“Mama Ebane, I Ntube, I am the one,” Ntube responded.)

“Oh, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, are you the one I am mistaking for a man? *Wah!* My eyes grow dimmer and dimmer every day. But if that is what God has said you should be, accept it. You are like a hut – you befit any foundation. Where are you taking the gun to?” *Nyango* Ebane asked.

“Your eyes are not growing dimmer. Hunters do wear women’s dresses to disguise themselves. I am going to Nkinchong to have the gun repaired,” Ntube responded.

“OK, go. I shall send you choice *binage* when I get home,” *Nyango* Ebane said and they parted. Once they parted, flashes of the underlying significance of *binage* and *mesiseh me mbange* (the pinkish cocoyam and pudding – a lover’s dish) flooded Ntube’s mind. She remembered that she had eaten the first gift of *binage* without spreading them under her bed. She smiled at what she thought was *Nyango* Ebane’s wishful thinking and continued her journey. So long as she was concerned, the gates of love making had been nailed closed forever. And of course, years of abstinence had blunted her senses and made her insensitive to sex and its niceties.

Chapter Fifteen

Ntube got to Nkinchong sweaty and exhausted. When she entered the blacksmith's workshop to show him the gun, a wonderful enticing female scent emanated from her sweaty body and infused the place with her essence. The blacksmith's masculine senses ruptured. He peered at her with great lust. He swallowed hard spittle, studied her keenly, saw the gulf that separated them and shook his head. As he stared at her he doubted whether an impudent fly had ever had the courage to settle on her body.

"Misa Bla, how you de look me so? You noba see woman carry gun?" Ntube asked ("Mr. Bla, (blacksmith), why are you staring at me like that? Have you never seen a woman carry a gun?").

"Madam, nobi only gun. Eye no get boundary," the blacksmith responded. ("Madam. It's not only the gun. Eyes see beyond".)

Ntube deciphered covetousness in the blacksmith and felt a little growth of hatred sprout in her bowels against men. She suppressed it and showed him the gun and what she wanted him to do. She said she needed the gun urgently, latest the next day. The blacksmith examined the gun thoroughly and shook his head. He said the gun required a lot of work. It couldn't be repaired in two weeks because he had to oil its rusty parts, sun it for several days to have the oil penetrate and soften the rust, then dismantle it and rebuild it.

There was no gainsaying. There were several guns lubricated and sunned outside. While they conversed, Mr. Diobe, the new headmaster of Saint Michel School Baseng came with a huge dog he called Terrier. He had given his gun

to the blacksmith and had come for it. He greeted Ntube and the blacksmith jointly. The blacksmith went to the inner chamber and got the HM's gun. He took it and admired the repairs.

"Mr. Bla, who sells gun powder here? I want to try the gun." the HM said.

"I sell it myself," the blacksmith responded.

The HM bought gun powder and started loading the gun. Just when he was completing, he saw a huge hornbill perch on a buma tree a good distance away. He made a few steps to shorten the distance and took aim at the bird. Before Ntube heard the report of the gun, the bird was falling. Terrier dashed forth and presently was dragging the huge bird toward its master. Ntube's hitherto fettered emotions broke loose. She became a victim of vibes that made her half admire and half adore the HM and his dog.

"HM, you are tough," the blacksmith congratulated.

"HM, you are like this," Ntube complimented raising her thumb.

The HM sniggered, patted his dog and asked the blacksmith what he thought should be done with the bird.

"If madam had time I would have suggested that she cooks it with plantains for us. But because I believe she has not got time, you can take it home" the blacksmith responded.

The blacksmith's response was not explicit. No one knew to whom his madam referred to – to the HM's wife, Ntube, or his (the blacksmith's) wife. In that confusion, the HM said, "Mr. Bla, I think we better give the bird to your guest – this lady. We shall kill our hornbill tomorrow. This is the season."

"My friend that is what I thought also. Let her take it.

Ntube was split between accepting the gift and refusing it. If she got it she would expose herself to answering a

thousand questions about its origins. That would lead to minor or full-fledged gossip around. If she refused it she would hurt benevolence. This she was willing to do because, a gift no matter its type, is an unintentional borrowing – a pledge to subject oneself to the dictates of, ‘one good turn deserves another’, for better or for worse. As she pondered over this, she saw Etame. She called him instinctively. He came panting. “Carry this bird home,” she ordered without thought. The boy got the bird and dashed off. On second thought Ntube called back the boy. Unfortunately he had gone. Ntube stood abashed with what she considered a very serious mistake. How could she accept the gift of a ‘state’ bird from a man she did not know? To mitigate the situation, she told the HM and the blacksmith about the menacing bats, and invited them to come and help shoot them and eat of the horn’bill. They both readily accepted the invitation.

Chapter Sixteen

Ntube returned to Atieg with a bumpy face. On her way back, she formulated and answered questions she thought the guards would ask her in relation to the acquisition of the state bird. When she got home the guards showed her the choice cocoyam *Nyango* Ebane had sent. It was, as usual, *hinage*. Ntube chuckled at the thought of the underlying meaning of the cocoyam. She entered the room and changed her dress then joined the guards in the parlour. She stared at them; expecting questions about the bird. None of them asked questions because Etame had told them that she bought the bird from the blacksmith. It was customary for people to buy birds. Etame had also depلمed the bird but did not chop it up. Before Ntube sent a guard for him, Etame himself came. He chopped up the bird and Ntube had it boiled in readiness for the next day cooking.

“How shall we eat this bird?” Ntube asked the guards.

“Birds are delicious with *sese* plantain,” one of the guards responded.

“I prefer them with *sese* cocoyam,” another chipped in.

“*Sese* cocoyam would be better; and by Jove! We have choice *hinage*. Isn’t that wonderful?” Ntube asked without thought.

The next day Saturday, the HM and the blacksmith came at around 2 o’clock in the afternoon. They saw for themselves the road littered with bat-droppings and heard the menacing noise. They studied the behaviour of the bats and devised strategies for shooting them.

Ntube had used *Nyango* Ebane’s choice cocoyam to prepare a highly spiced delicious pudding with the horn’bill. She prepared the *sese* cocoyam with no strings attached to it.

In other words, she did not prepare it as a lovers' dish although her exquisite cooking made it look like one.

She urged the HM and the blacksmith to eat before engaging themselves in the shooting. After they had eaten, they thanked and praised her exquisite cooking, then went out to further study the behaviour of the bats. While the guests were out, Ntube served the guards some of the pudding in a common bowl. Then she allowed the leftover to simmer on the smouldering fire. This was a special way of making the pudding to gradually cake or form into partially burnt flake that would be broken into thin slices and eaten as biscuits. Some astral power tended to guide her in the process of transforming *sese cocoyam* into semi-baked cocoyam.

The HM and the blacksmith re-entered the house and told Ntube that they were ready. Some of the guards dreaded gunshots and so remained in the house. Those who could withstand them followed the HM and the blacksmith to the shooting.

“Never catch fallen bats with your hands unless you are sure they are dead. Bats are very vicious and their bites can be very painful. Kill them discretely by hitting first, those that may likely fly away if they go through the shock and those whose struggle may make them fall in difficult terrain,” the HM advised and tied his dog Terrier to a pole. “They can even wound dogs,” he added. He then took aim at a very large cluster of bats. *Tuummmmmmm* the gun report went. Pandemonium broke out in the tree. While the unharmed bats scurried away in fright with loud clanks, the hit ones dropped to the ground and the badly and lightly wounded drifted downward in varying ways, like poorly built kites. The blacksmith jumped at them – hitting and killing the struggling ones with his club. In all, that first shot killed 34 bats. While the HM reloaded his gun for a second go at the bats the

stupid fellows flew back to perch and dispute about who owns what, in the same old branches. The HM took aim. *Tuummmmmmmmm* the gun report went again and again. Pandemonium broke out again in each case creating the same scenario on the ground. The tenth shooting invited curious children from up-village. The boys dashed in when the HM had just reloaded the eleventh round and was waiting for the bats to resettle. The bats hovered in the sky and made trial perches then flew away again in fright. Once a sizeable cluster was formed, it broke up fast as if each bat suspected the other of being the cause of the unrest. The HM waited on; the population swelled and very soon, there was quite a crowd. In the long wait, the HM moved onto Ntube and gave her the gun.

“Take aim at that cluster. There are about fifty bats in it. Bring them down,” he said.

Ntube got the gun and took aim. There was a sort of hush as the people held their breath. *Tuummmmmmmmm*, the gun homed in and the targeted cluster of bats dropped like a cluster of plums hit by a thrown bludgeon. The population went hysterical. Ntube suppressed overt joy at what she had achieved. Although she did not manifest open appreciation of the HM’s magnanimity, her whole system was set blaze. Deep down her, grew a foetus of undefined thoughts and expectations. She handed back the gun for reloading.

“Why don’t you reload it?” the HM asked and stretched his hand to hand back the gun to her. She sulked, and grimaced.

“I have never done it before,” she responded with a sigh.

“I’m sorry. OK, I shall teach you,” the HM promised and withdrew the gun to reload. He looked up at the tree; most of the bats were still on the wing. As he waited for them to resettle, the crowd grew even larger. Ntube drew her nose in

anticipation. Something, what? A desire. What? What was worrying her? Why was she becoming, I mean, what? E e e e, that she were to eee.

The bats resettled, the HM took aim. *Tuuuuuuuuuuu* the gunshot went – same scenario.

“Stupid thing,” Ntube insulted in her heart and sneered. “Why didn’t he eee...”

The new comers tried to rush at the falling bats. The HM and the blacksmith stopped them and advised them on what to do. Presently, the boys were hitting the bats with their clubs. By the time the operation ended, hundreds of bats lay dead. Those that survived the shooting took to flight without perching. It was now 6.30 pm and getting dark.

“What do we do with the bats?” the HM asked.

“We share them to those who eat them,” the blacksmith suggested

“Who does not eat bats in this village?” Ntube asked.

“OK, Mr. Bla, share them then. Give mine, take yours and give Madam; then give all those present,” the HM instructed.

“Do as he has said but leave some that I shall send to my people,” Ntube added.

After sharing the bats, Ntube, the HM and the blacksmith returned to her house. She went to the kitchen and brought the pudding, now well caked. She split it and served it in a common bowl for the three of them, leaving that of the guards in the pot. She then invited the HM and the blacksmith to eat. It was unearthly delicious. While they ate in silence Ntube observed them keenly fearing the caked pudding might have been over-salted. It happens that when pudding is made to cake there is a concentration of salt that can be very displeasing to the cook. After eating the HM and

the blacksmith fell short of overtly praising the cake. They stood up to go as if in disgust, to confirm Ntube's fears.

"Shall we continue tomorrow?" Ntube asked rather confusedly.

"I can't come here tomorrow," the HM responded.

Ntube's ears took a jolt at the response – "I can't come here tomorrow". She lost balance and bid them good bye. They left without knowing they had hurt her.

Chapter Seventeen

The HM and the blacksmith covered a good distance in silence, neither of them being able to find a topic of common interest on which to converse. Then perhaps because of the thoughts of Ntube's beauty and exquisite cooking that occupied his mind, the blacksmith stubbed his right foot and broke the silence.

"Mr. HM," he addressed the HM, "how have you admired that woman? Do you think a fly can ever have courage to settle on her? I swear to God, I have never seen a woman so beautiful – beautiful in body and in cooking."

"Mr. Bla, a beautiful woman is like a deep black pool. If you want to fish in it, you must have a long fishing line. I believe you have one. She is really exquisite," the HM responded.

"Mr. HM, the God that created you people of high class buttered your bread," the blacksmith said with a tint of jealousy

"Mr. Bla, why do you say that? Is that woman wearing a badge of class? The Englishman says, 'A feeble heart never wins a fair lady'. Don't be defeated in a war you have already won. That woman's gun is with you. She has developed a liking for killing bats. If you decide to repair her gun this night, you will win her over tomorrow. Tomorrow is Sunday. Just set yourself to work tonight and tomorrow you have her," the HM said.

"Mr. HM, what are you saying? Do you think she cooked that food for me? A big gun killed a big bird; a big bird killed a big woman. Am I the one who killed the bird?" the blacksmith asked.

“Mr. Bla, if you hear the stories about that woman you will not take her for a penny. She is the cooking spoon that stirs boiling broth,” the HM said as they got to the big field.

“Mr. HM, a woman is a woman. An elephant has no fangs,” the blacksmith remarked just when they got at the point of separation – he to return to Nkinchong and the HM to the Mission.

The HM’s “I can’t come here tomorrow,” played havoc in Ntube’s mind. She tried to suppress it by joining the guards in cleaning the bats. Yet every joke they cracked tended to upset her causing the grudge to build up into anger and self-pity. The guards soon realized that there was something wrong. All their attempts to find out what was wrong with their once jovial heroine failed. So they hastened up the cleaning of bats and when they finished retired to bed.

The bats that had survived the shooting and were flying all about did trial perching several times before deciding to perch in silence. The night was thus quiet and Ntube and her guards forgot about them and hooting owls and slept as they had never done before.

Ntube woke up early to go to church and give her godmother some bats before mass. In fact she thought if she saw her before mass there would be no need going to her house again after mass. That would help her sneak away before the crowd formed in front of the church for greetings and gossip. She was under the sinister spell of avoiding the HM and his friend the blacksmith.

After mass, the crowd formed in front of the church as expected. People craned their heads over others to have a glimpse of Ntube. They had seen her in church, and wanted to thank her for the bats she had sent to them and to congratulate her for the feat of not only shooting a gun, but killing bats. The HM on his part had wanted to see her to

arrange when next they would have a go at the bats. After a long futile search, he gave up with a sigh and insulted, “Ungrateful bitch,” and returned to his house with stabbing disappointment.

Chapter Eighteen

Ntube got home with a little listlessness and a dull headache. She slumped into a wooden sofa and cast back her mind at the scene in front of the church after mass. She shook her head as she saw in her mind's eyes what she was missing – a thousand handshakes, hugs, praises, sympathies, blames, apologies, advices and what have you? Why had she to lose all that simply because she wanted to avoid the HM and his friend the blacksmith? What special attachment had she to them? They coincidentally met at the blacksmith's. The HM killed a state bird and gave it to her to cook; Yes. She cooked it and they all ate; Yes. They killed bats and divided them among them and the natives; Yes. All this was done without strings; Yes. As sure as daybreak, they returned to their respective homes and she remained in hers; Yes. But then, where did the problem of not wanting to see them come from? And was it the bedrock of her mild headache and loss of peace? Why was the loss of peace swelling into anger and self-pity? Has she ever had such experience in life before? Yes. When? When Nsahbinla's "Mary I love you. I love you very much. I want to marry you." ruptured her hitherto fettered bubbling untamed childhood sentiments and led her into an unsanctified marriage that led to the curse that ruined her life. How did "Mary I love you. I love you very much. I want to marry you," relate with "I can't come here tomorrow?" Inexplicable as this seemed to be, there was for sure, some poignant and mystical link. Yes, there was an elusive link. Yes.

As she tried to swallow a lump of hard spittle, she heard *kwag kwag kwag* at the door. She peered at the intruder, it was Nyango Ebane.

“*A nye Eban’*,” she called *Nyango Ebane* in a rather suppressed exclamation. “You went to church?”

“Yes, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, I went to church. When I was going, I passed through here to thank you for the bats you sent to me and to give you a bottle of *mezab*. When I asked of you, your guards told me you left very early for the Mission,” *Nyango Ebane* said.

“A bottle of *mezab*! That is very kind of you. I have seen and eaten *mezab* only once. My mother told me it was very rare and expensive oil. Where did you get a whole bottle? Thank you very much.”

“My junior brother is a hunter and time and again he brings from the forest the seeds from which the oil is made. As you say, it is very expensive oil – superbly good in preparing *sese* – mostly *sese* meant for two.”

“*A nye Eban’*, you will kill me with laughter. So if I cook my *sese* with the *mezab* I must wait for a man to come on before I eat it? Where are the men in this vicinity? Or you are looking for one for me. Thank you very much.”

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, nobody organizes hunting expeditions for mushrooms. People simply find mushrooms.”

“*A nye Eban’*, it is those who go to the forest who find mushrooms not those who bask at home.”

“Do those who bask at home not go to the toilet behind the houses?” *Nyango Ebane* asked and wished *Ntube* good bye.

Soon after she left, the guards returned from church and showed *Ntube* the *mezab*. She took it and while she admired it they suggested that they use it in cooking *sese* with the remaining *hinage* and bats. *Ntube* took offence at the suggestion.

“You want to have your first taste of *mezab* here? Do you know what it takes to owe somebody the gift of *mezab*? Do you know the significance of *mezab*? If you don’t, go and ask your respective mothers,” Ntube said and kept the oil in her room.

The guards sensed bubbling hostility and thought it was a continuation of the previous evening’s waspishness. It was strange, but real. Instead of finding out what was wrong, they asked for leave to visit their respective compounds. Ntube granted their request with a cynical distribution of the bats left. She called the guards, took the container of bats and shared them almost equally among them with the implication that they should go and cook and eat them with their parents’ *mezab*. The guards understood the silent language, took the bats and left; leaving her alone.

As soon as they left, she slumped into the wooden sofa again to think things over. Nothing tangible seemed to be the root cause of her listlessness. The quiet of the house lured her to sleep and presently, she was in the grip of ghastly sorts of nightmares reminiscent of the ones she had when she was at the Mission. In the cacophony of the noise made by the Ndibendele waterfall, were cries of children and adults; and at the background, the sound of the big drum announcing death. She felt frightened and was about to flee when a familiar voice told her not to fear but to brave the odds. In spite of that, she tried to run but fell into a ditch and woke up, drenched with sweat. She sighed, got up and went out to air herself. She looked up at the buma tree and saw the bats soaring and circling it with renewed confidence. She thought of the day the blacksmith would repair her gun and breathed in deeply. As she was about reentering the house, she saw one of the guards coming.

“Sister Mary,” she addressed Ntube, “we shall not return today. We are going to Ngolo to attend the death of our uncle *Sango* Ebomtane – the oldest man of Mbuogmut clan. Didn’t you hear the big drum announcing death? He died last evening.”

“*Weeeeh!*” Ntube exclaimed. “So it is that big drum that I heard in my dream? *Seh* Ebomtane was still alive?”

“Yes, he was. His grand-daughter brought the news of his death about an hour ago,” the guard said and left.

With the guards gone, and left alone, Ntube plunged herself once more into analyzing the HM’s “I can’t come here tomorrow”. After a brief while, she realized that she had given the affair undue attention. After all, her meeting with the HM was coincidental and there was no reason why a coincidental utterance should be taken to heart. With that, she tried to brush the matter aside. She prepared herself a little meal and had a quiet night.

Chapter Nineteen

The next day Monday was a boring day. With nobody to talk to and nothing significant to do, Ntube thought of attending the burial of *Sango* Ebomtane at Ngolo. To have company, she waited for Ngomboku and Baseng people who would be going for the burial also. When they came and tried to engage her in conversation about her problems with the people of her clan, she changed her mind and decided to go to Nkinchong to urge the blacksmith to repair her gun. She got to Nkinchong when the blacksmith had dismantled the gun and was scrubbing the pieces, oiling them and drying them in the sun. Ntube recognized the gun from its boot.

“Mr. Bla, good afternoon. I see, you have started work. Thank you. I need that gun very badly and urgently.”

“I have started work but I think you must buy a new gun if your intention is to use it in killing bats. See, the barrel of this gun is badly rusted. If you prime it well to kill bats it may explode and kill you.”

“Have you new guns? How much will a good new one cost?”

“You really want to buy a gun? If it is for killing bats why don’t you borrow a gun?”

“You have guns. Lend me one then.”

“The guns I have are of low quality. It’s the HM who has a good gun. You can borrow his.”

Ntube took offence at the mention of the HM’s gun.

“Have the two of you conspired to disqualify my father’s gun so as to make me go on my bended knees to borrow the HM’s gun? What difference do you say the guns have? If he is working through you, tell him water begged from a neighbour

never cooks a meal. I don't want his gun. I shall go to Tombel and buy a gun if the blacksmiths there also say my father's gun is not good enough."

"Madam why are you so angry at the truth I have told you?"

"Reassemble my gun. I shall take it to Tombel tomorrow. If it is bad, I shall buy a new one."

"OK madam," the blacksmith responded, reassembled the gun and handed it to her. The next day, she went to Tombel. The Tombel blacksmiths confirmed that the gun had corroded badly. The barrel of her father's gun was a piece of water pipe and because of long disuse; it had rusted and was dangerous. Mr. Okore, her niece's husband then helped her acquire a steel barrel gun and a good quantity of gun powder. On her way home an ecstatic Ntube sang self praise songs, the last one being:

The deity has come, the deity has come.

If we are not deities, who are the deities?

The deity has come, the deity has come.

If we are not deities, who are the deities?

The deity has come, the deity has come.

It was the third day of the death of *Sango* Ebomtane – the day of *abieg*. The people, men and women who were returning from the *abieg* celebration heard the singing from a distance and wondered which deity was going to *Sango* Ebomtane's *abieg* that late. Furthermore, they could not reconcile the voice and the song. It was definitely a female voice, singing a male song, a *Muankum* song. When Ntube got to the hammock, she stopped singing while crossing it. Before she resumed, the people came from the opposite side and that held her back. The people thought the singer was behind, on the other side of the hammock and so greeted Ntube without comment. After crossing the hammock and covering a distance without

meeting any other person, they started doubting whether it was not Ntube who sang the *Muankum* song. Before long, their doubts were cleared as she resumed the singing.

“This world is pregnant. It will give birth. I have seen seven scores, I better die than see what the children and women of today are doing with our time tested culture,” one elderly man commented.

“Not all children and women. That child, she is called Ntube. Ntube wears a mane. If they tell me she has balls I won’t doubt. Ntube is strangulating the Mbuogmut clan. She has shuttled and stirred up the Mbuogmut clan as a woman does *sese cocoyam*,” another man added.

“Our people say, pomposity either steals or tells lies. Ntube does both. The thing is that she is doing all that in a female clan. If it were in a male clan like the Muambong clan, *Dion de se* would have finished with her by now,” a woman remarked.

“What do you call *Dion de se*? Ntube has disproved *Dion de se*. *She* is as waterproof as the back of a tortoise. Where have the Mbuogmut people not taken her to? My father-in-law is the chief priest of *Dion de se*. The Mbuogmut people have met him several times to put an end to Ntube but his exploits have been completely neutralised. Whatever he does, Ntube foils with impunity,” another woman said. Before she ended, they heard gunshots.

“If they tell me she is the one shooting like that, I shan’t doubt. Don’t think she was carrying two guns for somebody. They are her guns,” a young man said.

Ntube got home exhausted – her shoulders sore with the weight of the guns. She had shot at the bats twice to announce her new status and made them scurry from the tree in fright and protesting with earsplitting clangs. When she got to the house she hid the guns in her room with the thought

of surprising her guards with her new acquisition when they returned from Ngolo. Unfortunately they did not return when she expected them. The next day she went to Nkinchong to show the blacksmith her new gun. He hailed it and told her it could be primed to kill elephants. He said the barrel was superior to that of the HM and showed her the trademark. Ntube glowed with pride and thanked the blacksmith for his advice.

Chapter Twenty

The Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python had every reason to take pride in her gun. It gave her extra protection and filled her with an aura she could not express in words but could stake herself with, to counter bluffs like, "I can't come here tomorrow". Furthermore, her gun was superior to any other around. So, in gun possession, she had prime of place. But she lacked a Terrier. She needed a dog that would do the marvel of dashing forth to pick shot birds or game in general and bring them to its mistress. With that burning desire, she lost interest in shooting bats. She sent word to a dog breeder at Kodmin and before long; he brought her a huge wild female dog.

"This is the only dog that suits your specification. I have to familiarize you with it before I go. I must see you feed it and make yourself intimate to it for it to accept you before I leave. Else, it would return to me. So, feed it in front of me. Call it Dio as you feed and soothe it. Dogs are better acquired when they are young. You may have problems with Dio," the breeder said.

Ntube did as she was asked to, and very soon the dog started wagging its tail in appreciation of her. In spite of that, the man tied it to a pole at the veranda to prevent it from following him. He advised her to always chain it in order to make of it a good guard.

"How much do I pay for the dog?" Ntube asked.

"Nothing. It's a gift. I admire you very much. It's a gift. Take good care of it. It will give you satisfaction," the breeder said.

"I thank you very much. How do you come to admire a person the whole clan dreads?"

“A clan that smears itself with shit like a cow suffering from diarrhea? Some of us are solidly behind you. Don’t waver, stand firm, the elephant has no fangs,” the breeder said.

“Thank you once more. Since you say your dog is a gift, I would like you to take a gift home to your wife and children. Tell them I am the one who has sent it to them,” Ntube said and gave the man money she approximated would be the cost of the dog. She was now a proud owner of a bullterrier.

The dog proved too unfriendly with the guards to Ntube’s admiration. Since she knew the guards were there temporarily, she did not want her dog to create secondary loyalties that would jeopardize the security of her compound. Using its unfriendliness with the guards as a pretext she suggested that they return to their respective homes. They readily did so. Her security was now fully in her hands – her gun and dog. She had Dio chained in the day but let it loose at night. Once loose, it scouted all the nooks and crannies of the compound and imposed its prerogatives on the open space. Its ferocious barks scared women and most of them stopped going for morning mass. Though it never bit anybody, the women complained bitterly and Ntube was forced to employ a work cooperative to build a fence round her house to limit Dio’s spatial prerogatives. With that done, the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python was now in a fortress.

The fortress gave her all the comfort she needed. To fight boredom, she grew a variety of vegetables in her garden and raised pigs, fowls and goats. She had promised her godmother that she would avoid confrontation with the people of the Mbuogmut clan by keeping to her compound – not visiting people nor allowing them visit her. To re-enforce that, she decided not to shoot even bats. Shooting bats would draw undue attention on her. So, she shifted her interest from

it to caring for Dio, the cats and the goats and fowls. She could interpret Dio's whines, barks and yelps and react accordingly – long sniffy whines and growls meant danger approaching from a distance, sharp quick barks meant nearby danger, heavy intermittent barks and growls meant warning intruders. With that, the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python was so confident in her dog and felt so secured in her compound that she hardly locked her door especially when she went for siesta.

Chapter Twenty One

Isolation is a double edged sword. Inasmuch as it brings one peace of mind; it can be very punitive when it leads to recollections of past experiences. Ntube's thoughts swung from the relative peace she had in her fortress to her traumatic past life. The fact that she was slipping or had slipped out of the childbearing age made her at times very pensive and sad. Time and again, she remembered how she had accompanied her mother (Emade) and her aunt (Ahone) to Muabag to assist their terminally sick sister Mechane; Mechane's misery in her sick bed, her subsequent death and burial, and the ceremony of the permanent closing of her door, the door of the last person of an extinct family. The thought of it made her ruffle her face, shake her head and lament her situation. She was the last person of a virtually extinct family. Her father had died. Her mother Emade had died. She herself had no child. With that, she thought she would be reduced to a state worse than Mechane's. Mechane had a lone daughter, Wobe. Wobe was married to a non-Cameroonian in far away Tombel. Whenever Mechane fell sick, her nearby half sister Ahone went and assisted her. Sometimes, when Wobe heard about the illness, she went to assist her. But when neither of them heard about the illness, Mechane went through hell. And so was the case on that last day when Ntube's mother Emade, her aunt Ahone, and herself went to Muabag to assist Mechane. It was a pathetic situation. They met Mechane dying miserably in a lonely cold house. Will that be her (Ntube's) case? Who would take care of her in her sick bed? Who would bury her? Her only surviving close relative, Wobe her niece, was elderly. Being

elderly she would probably die before her. So, who would bury the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python?

In spite of those gnawing thoughts, Ntube's new found peace in her fortress was a restorative balm. Her resolve to allow nature have its way neutralized the poignancy of the situation. Her promise to avoid confrontation with the people of the clan by sticking to her compound and discouraging visits was being imposed by Dio. Being free of irritating gossip, coupled with prolonged abstinence virtually blunted her emotional impulses. And with that, her body rejuvenated, making of her, a cast of her youth, what the Bakossi people call *e bong be ekòm* (the beauty of barrenness)

One day as she was sweeping her compound, she noticed that Dio was fidgety. It whined and growled and tried to jump out of the compound apparently without cause. Ntube went out of the compound to find out if there was something strange around. There was nothing. She reentered the compound and ordered the dog to calm down. It instead intensified the growling. Before long, it was barking very furiously. Unable to control it, she allowed it spend itself. But Dio barked more wrathfully forcing her to step out again and again. At the fourth, she saw a Land Rover waddling towards her compound. It had crossed the river at the stepping stones. While Dio yelped and yelped and whined Ntube stood transfixed, completely baffled. The Land Rover came close and stopped by her.

"Girlie," a voice came from it. The dog barked and barked, drowning the voice and forcing the speaker to shout out, "Is this the compound of Mary Ntube?"

"Yes. Which Mary Ntube?" Ntube asked confusedly.

"Mary Ntube, once married to Mr. Nsahbinla," the voice explained in a volley of barks. Ntube held the dog and reentered the compound to tie it. With the dog taken away,

the two occupants of the car got out just when Ntubé reopened the gate to attend to them.

“Weeeeeee! Mr. Ndzerem. Weeeeeee! Auntie Veronica,” Ntubé exclaimed as she recognized Mr. and Mrs. Ndzerem. They peered at her in disbelief.

“Mary!” Mrs. Ndzerem jumped at her and started hugging her. “Is this you? God bless my soul. Unbelievable, you look fourteen. Fantastic!”

“Auntie, what brings you here? Welcome,” Ntubé exulted and freed herself from her grip to hug Mr. Ndzerem. “Welcome, welcome, I am so elated. Welcome. Do we go in?” she asked as she led the way.

“Can you get some children to help unload the Land Rover?” Mr. Ndzerem asked.

“Let’s go in. I shall go for Etame,” Ntubé responded and led the guests in. Dio stopped barking, and as if shame faced, wagged its tail to complement its mistress’s welcoming of the guests. Once the guests were seated, Ntubé dashed to the village for Etame and presently, the boys were unloading the Land Rover. As soon as they finished and carried the things to the house, Ntubé prepared a quick meal of *sese* with *binage* and *mexzeb* for three. Mr. Ndzerem who was itchy to go was surprised at the speed with which Ntubé prepared the meal. They ate in silence – Ntubé observing them with keen interest. She had thought the meal wouldn’t please them. But they ate it with all relish.

“Mary, I shall leave you and auntie. I am going to Upper Bakossi to inspect the last bridges we built there. Public Works Department is winding up its activities in former Southern Cameroons. It will be merged or taken over by the Federal Government as from next month. Auntie will be here with you for two days. I believe she will have a feel of you, and you of her, for the two days. If not, then I shall carry you

to Kumba for further whatever. I shall return on Friday afternoon. I hope she will go and wait at the big field,” Mr. Ndzerem said and bid them good bye.

Chapter Twenty Two

Immediately Mr. Ndzerem left, Ntube screeched and clapped her hands. She peered at Mrs. Ndzerem. Their eyes met.

“Auntie, I thought I shall never see you in Atieg. Is it you I am seeing? I am so elated to see you. Welcome,” Ntube said.

“Mary, I knew you had not taken it kindly, but let me tell you, I had carried the elephant on my chest and the buffalo on my back. Oil up, water down. When my husband mentioned two days ago that he would be coming to inspect bridges in Bakossi, I told him I had to come and see you. The casual meetings we had after your mother’s death could not replace my coming here to see her grave. What little thing you see there was assembled in the greatest hurry. Take it in good faith. I still owe you lots of apologies. Please, do me the favour to show me the grave. I know my husband would have liked to see it also but I believe he had a slip of the mind.”

Ntube felt untoward vibes ravage her soul. She lost balance. Mrs. Ndzerem rushed to her and held her. “Please, Mary, take heart. I knew, I knew I would be scraping old scars. Please, take heart,” she supplicated.

Ntube took courage and led the way to where Emade was buried. “Here she lies. Here, lies the Wife-of-the-Upstream-Python, I have every reason to sob whenever something reminds me of her death. She died because of love for me. She died because I failed her. And what made me fail her, I lost in the most humiliating manner eh, eh, e,.. It hurts, it really hurts,” she said with a sudden reeling of her head,

trying to suppress a flood of tears that was building up in her eyes.

“May she rest in perfect peace. Let’s forget what killed her. Let’s forget what you lost. May her soul rest with the Lord,” Mrs. Ndzerem prayed and after a brief while, they returned to the house.

“There are perishable things in those bundles. You better take them out and see how best you can take care of them,” Mrs. Ndzerem drew Ntube’s attention to the gifts they had brought. Ntube got the bundles and opened them.

“Unbelievable! Auntie you have brought the whole Kumba market to Atieg. There is so much of everything here. I stand the risk of drawing attention onto myself once more by sharing them. Thank you very much,” Ntube said and started sharing the bread, the *bonga*, the crayfish, the soap, the rice and *egusi*. She thought first of *Nyango* Ebane, then *Nyango* Nneh and *Nyango* Eloë. She gave three bundles to Etame, (emphasizing on that meant for *Nyango* Ebane) to go and give them and told him to invite some other boys to come and help distribute the remaining bundles.

“Thank the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python for me and tell her that since her dog has put a wedge between us, I don’t know how to come and thank her. Say, I shall brave the odds when the *hinage* and *mezab* I am assembling are ready. So when she hears a knock at her gate she should know I am the one,” *Nyango* Ebane told Etame to tell Ntube.

Etame returned with five children and very soon, they were distributing the gifts to the village women. The women were very thankful but regretted the split Dio had imposed between Ntube and them. Mrs. Ndzerem was greatly impressed with Ntube’s generosity.

“Mary, I believe your village women should love you very much, or should I say it the other way round? You have

shared nearly all that we have brought. That is great,” she remarked.

“The women are very supportive but the men are horrible. They owe me grudges I can’t understand. They say I destroyed their Brook-of-the-Serpent. They accuse me of being responsible for the abandonment of their ritual things at the village grove. So, they are unfriendly.”

“That is serious. How do you handle that? Those are very damaging accusations – especially as they are levied against a woman. That is tantamount to saying you have broken age old traditions. Amongst my Nso people, it is unheard of that a woman is accused of violating traditions.”

“The crocodile and the hippopotamus belong to the river. The hippo will not abandon it to the crocodile. If it is death, they are condemned to die there,” Ntube said lightheartedly and went to the kitchen to keep what she had preserved for herself. Mrs. Ndzerem stared at her as she went and shrugged her shoulders in disbelief. “This is a sure case of hunting lions in their dens. This is unacceptable uppishness. How can a woman consider herself a hippopotamus that must share the river with the crocodile – her society? For sure, only crowned ignorance can say such things,” Mrs. Ndzerem said in her heart and thought she would use that to explain to Ntube that her village was a dangerous place for her and she should contemplate abandoning it.

Ntube did not return to continue the conversation. She remained in the kitchen to prepare the evening meal for two. She prepared a typical Bakossi dish – *esubag ne kwangkala*. In preparing the *kwangkala*, she used rare native spices and with the aroma of porcupine, it tasted wonderfully marvellous.

“Antie, you may be embarrassed at what I have cooked for us. It is a pure Bakossi dish, best eaten by the fireside. So,

let's move to the kitchen and have the Bakossi feel. You may not like it but it is a way of saying, 'if you like frogs, you must like their eyes'," Ntube said as she invited Mrs. Ndzerem to the kitchen. They ate in silence; Mrs. Ndzerem's taste buds working hard to decipher the spices used in preparing the *kwangkalang*.

"Mary, I have eaten twice since I came here and in each case, you have proved to be a wonderful cook. You are so gifted. I have enjoyed your traditional dish. How I wish my husband were here to share in my admiration," Mrs. Ndzerem appreciated the meal.

"Your husband is a Bakossi man minus language. He has worked for so long among Bakossi people that he enjoys even *nzeb e ngen* – saltless soup," Ntube responded.

"I know he admires Bakossi dishes and that is why he misses you and is greatly saddened by your divorce. In fact, whenever he thinks of you, he condemns your husband's decision to divorce," Mrs. Ndzerem revealed.

"That is over now. The sun shines in the day, the moon in the night. Humiliating, inhuman and devastating as it was, I took it as it came. The only stabbing reminder of it is the loss of my mother," Ntube responded and tidied up the place for them to return to the main house.

Chapter Twenty Three

It was eight o'clock in the evening. The bats and owls had not been disturbed for a long time and so, probably for them to remind Ntube and her guest that they were alive, strong and kicking; they clanged and hooted menacingly. Ntube screwed her face with a little growth of shame and disgust.

"Mary, how do you sleep here with all this weird noise?" Mrs. Ndzerem asked.

"I was born in the noise. It means nothing to me. I'm only afraid that because you are unaccustomed to it you may not have a quiet night," Ntube responded, entered her room, got her gun and went out. Mrs. Ndzerem held her breath. "She even has a gun and has the guts to chase after hooting owls at night. Plain insanity!" she exclaimed in her heart and waited to see the outcome. Presently she heard the gunshot. Ntube returned, leaving Dio behind. Very soon, the dog came in, dragging a huge owl along.

"Woo! Woo! woo! Mary, Mary! What is this, your dog has brought in?" Mrs. Ndzerem screamed as the dog heaved the bird in the parlour.

"Mbuogmut wizards," Ntube responded, got the bleeding bird by the legs and carried it outside and burnt it. Mrs. Ndzerem lost train of thought as she half condemned and half praised Ntube for her courage. It took a long while for her to restart the conversation.

"Mary, don't you think it would have been better for you to move out of here? I believe if you were in Tombel or Kumba, or one of the townships, you could manage a small business. You are a fantastic cook. If you opened a restaurant in Kumba, you would count yourself rich in a few years. You

can even start a retail business – you buy from big traders and sell in a small shop.”

“I had wanted to be a township woman – a woman at the peak of society; I got to the brow of the summit and slipped, and tumbled down, down, down my original valley. Another attempt may see me in the grave.”

“That is negative thinking. Suppose, Mary, you dreamt you reconciled with your husband. How will you react in the morning?”

“Auntie, I am sorry, I should call it a slip of thought. How is he now? I am sorry I did not enquire about his health when you came. I’m sorry.”

“God created the two of you in a special way. You look like a fourteen year old girl. Nsahbinla looks the same. He has wonderfully and miraculously recovered from his illness. Agreed, he still walks with a slight gait. I say slight because it is hardly noticed. In fact, he is OK. All good-day friends and relatives, who abandoned him when he lost his case with his people and suffered a stroke, scurried back when the Appeal court reversed the verdict of the Lower court, reinstated him to his functions with full salary arrears and awarded him heavy damages. He has bought the house he is living in and renovated it to his taste – high class taste. You need see him. You can’t believe it.”

“That is good. I wish him well. As for the question you asked, if I dreamt that I reconciled with him, I would rush to Kumba and ask you to go and plead my case.”

“Mary, I hope you are not pulling my legs?”

“Auntie, you might have pulled mine.”

“Mary, I did not. Sincerely, I did not. If you won’t mind, seeing your daggers-drawn situation with your people and the placement of your compound, I would suggest that you move out of here and either be on your own in a township where

my husband and I can assist you, or reconcile with Nsahbinla. We have discussed it with him and he is very apologetic. He is indebted to you for the care you gave him when he was in hospital. In fact, he is ready, very ready for the reconciliation. Please Mary; you are so dear to us.”

Bile gusted into Ntube’s mouth. Hate welled up in her. Her mind worked fast. She knew she was obliged to be hospitable to her guest. She breathed in deeply and in exhaling said, “Auntie, I shall think over it very seriously tonight. Let’s go to bed.”

Mrs. Ndzerem welcomed the suggestion and went to bed in great anticipation of the outcome of her mission. The next day, Ntube got up very early and went up-village to send Etame to Ekenzu. She gave him money and asked him to tell her aunt Ahone, to buy a lot of sweet yams and plantains for her guest – the guest who brought the wonderful gifts she had sent to her. She said the things should be brought on Friday morning and carried straight to the main road. She then returned to prepare breakfast for her guest. It was simple breakfast – eggs and fried ripe plantain.

After breakfast, Ntube took her guest round her compound and showed her what kept her busy. While appreciating the pigpens and the stables and vegetable garden, Mrs. Ndzerem remarked, “How I wish all this was for two.”

“Surely for Nsahbinla,” Ntube snapped, taking her guest off guard. Mrs. Ndzerem deciphered some sort of unfavourable tone in what Ntube had said.

“Mary, not necessarily for him. Any other person could do,” Mrs. Ndzerem tried to save her face.

“I have just complimented. Can there be a better person? I have said it in good faith,” Ntube feigned an excuse and led the way back to the house. They moved with their eyes cast

on the ground – a sign of discordant relations. Ntube realized it quickly and tried to mitigate the tension with frank talk.

“Auntie, sometimes serious things are said lightheartedly. It appears you actually wish that I return to Nsahbinla. Since you say you discussed it with your husband, don’t you think it would be better for him to be present when I give my response? We shall meet with him at the main road tomorrow and while the vehicle is being loaded, I can tell you what I think about it.”

“OK Mary. That would be great,” Mrs. Ndzerem said and brightened up. Presently, the boy who helped tend the sheep and goats came. He opened the stables and Mrs. Ndzerem was surprised at the quality of sheep and goats Ntube had.

“Mary, you are a real shepherd. You have a special gift in tending your animals,”

“Ntube smiled and asked, “Which do you prefer – sheep or goat? Goats are a little stubborn.”

“I don’t think it matters much, sheep do better in townships.”

Ntube was glad to hear that. She had thought of giving the Ndzerems a goat. But with what Mrs. Ndzerem had said, she asked her stableman to take one huge female sheep to the main road and wait for them. Although Mrs. Ndzerem saw the sheep being led to the main road she never thought it was meant for them. It was too huge for a gift. Etame and his friends had carried the sweet yams, plantains and other gifts from Ahone to the main road and very soon they were joined by the stableboy. They did not wait for long. Ntube and her guest soon came and within an interval of ten minutes, Mr. Ndzerem came with the Land Rover.

Mrs. Ndzerem was flabbergasted with what she saw as gifts. The Land Rover had to be packed methodically for it to contain all the things. While the children were doing so,

Ntube invited the Ndzerems out of earshot, to tell them her opinion about Mrs. Ndzerem's suggestion.

"Pa, Ndzerem, auntie told me that you discussed the possibility of my reconciling with my former husband, Mr. Nsahbinla. She said he gave his accord and was very apologetic at what happened. I stand to be corrected. If that was the cause of her visit, (I believe it wasn't) then you had given the matter very serious thought. In giving it very serious thought also, I had to wait for you in order to give my response. I should thank you most heartily for your concern and well-wishes. The letter and money you sent to me when my mother died, your kindness to me whenever I came to Kumba on my way to and fro for consultation in Victoria and the gifts you have brought during this trip are testimony of your love for me. My late mother used to tell me that a dog with a tail, wags its tail in dignity to show appreciation, but a tailless dog degradingly rolls itself in dust to show the same degree of appreciation. I can only roll in dust and I believe that would show how indebted I am to you.

I should however say with all concern and fear of hurting you that, the best any person can wish me now is to encourage me make myself comfortable on my parents' graves. I have hurdles but they are not insurmountable. Even if they were, insurmountable hurdles, like a flat coin, have only two sides. So, tell Mr. Nsahbinla that a seedling transplanted twice in a season either bears out of season or never bears at all. I have been transplanted several times. My shoot has withered. I need no other transplanting. We are all human beings sharing this rotating earth. It tosses and stirs us up and down like *sese* cocoyam in a pudding-making process. We never can tell when we shall be bashed together, and separated again by a gentle or violent shuttle. If we meet, we thank our God. If we don't, adieu."

Ntube thought having worked the whole night trimming the original response (to Mrs. Ndzerem's suggestion) of all offending elements; what she had said was just a harmless husk. But Mr. and Mrs. Ndzerem got the full blast of the dynamite. They stood transfixed as the response devastated their nerves. Did Ntube's adieu mean severed relations? Mr. Ndzerem recovered faster from the shock and responded to save their faces;

"Mary, as you say, you stand to be corrected. My wife came here purposefully to pay homage to your late mother. But for a slip of thought, I would have liked to be there when she went to the grave. So, any other matter was an aside. I would pray you not to take offense on it. We are returning with the same degree of love and respect for you as ever before." Having said that, he held his still stunned wife by the hand and led her to the Land Rover. Before they entered the vehicle she recovered and feigned a farewell handshake with the children and hugged Ntube. Then they drove off speechlessly till they got to the Mungo River crossing.

"I am still flabbergasted; I can't understand what Mary told us. She sounded so impudent, so sulky, I mean, I lack words to describe it," Mr. Ndzerem started the conversation.

"I am not surprised. If I tell you what I saw Mary do in the two days I stayed with her, you will never believe. If I did not know her as a child, I would have said she was insolent. But I think hard life has warped her reasoning. She has become sheepishly bold and what she does tends to reflect a bit of insanity. I pity her," Mrs. Ndzerem responded and remained silent till they got to Kumba. When they offloaded the Land Rover, she exclaimed, "Didn't I tell you! She has apparently paid back to the last penny what we carried to her. Just take stock of what she has given us; price that sheep, the

yams and the plantains, you will see that we owe her. Mary is no longer the Mary I knew. ”

“She’s a master-craftswoman then. She tantalized us before we entered the vehicle and had her way in making us not realize the trade by barter. However, it is late and perhaps that ties in well with her adieu. So, that’s it.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Immediately the Ndzerems left, Ntube and the children set forth for Atieg. The children were noisy but she cast down her eyes to think over her encounter with her guests. She thought she had purged herself of the gnawing issue but was worried with the way it affected the Ndzerems. She found herself caught in quagmire. Although she had not wanted to sever relations with them, she had no choice but to be firm; and being firm meant that she had to be blunt; after all, there is no gentle stroke in killing a snake.

When they got to the *buma* tree, she told Etame to look for the tree-feller to fell it. "It is on that tree that the owl that disgraced me hooted," she said.

"He travelled to Tombel and will be there for one week. When he returns, he will do it." Etame assured.

"OK, I need not remind you. When he comes, let him do it. Take this for his advance and this for you and your friends who carried the things to the main road. Thank you very much," Ntube said, gave Etame some money and returned to her fortress.

On reaching her house, she slumped into the wooden sofa, troubled by smouldering guilt of having over reacted against Mrs. Ndzerem's suggestion. But what was over reaction about it? It was a simple straightforward refusal to have Nsahbinla in her life again. There was no other way of saying it. It had to be said bluntly; and bluntly she had said it. "OK, I shall visit them in Kumba in a week. If I get there, they would know I was simply frank in refusing their proposal," she said and next Friday, she left for Kumba.

Mrs. Ndzerem developed instant palpitation when she saw her enter the house. It was exactly seven days since their

return from Bakossi. Ntube's entry was pith-less. It lacked the cadence that made the previous visits explode in warm embrace, hugging and kissing.

"Whel, whel welcome, Mary," She stammered out of confused thoughts.

"Thank you auntie," Ntube responded; baffled by the shakiness of Mrs. Ndzerem's voice.

Still enveloped in guilt and self pity, Mrs. Ndzerem cast her eyes on the ground to avoid Ntube's eyes. She entered the room and tried to compose herself. She tried to figure out what Ntube would say when she would see her former husband Nsahbinla. He had visited them a day before and had just strolled out with Mr. Ndzerem. When they would return, (Mrs. Ndzerem thought) Ntube would surely say she (Mrs. Ndzerem) had lied when she said she visited Atieg primarily to pay homage to Ntube's late mother? Ntube would say Nsahbinla's visit was to get the feedback of their mission to Atieg.

"Auntie, where is pah?" Ntube asked.

"They have just strolled out," Mrs. Ndzerem responded.

"He and who?" Ntube asked.

"And, and your former husband," she responded with stabbing guilt.

"He has visited you?" Ntube asked.

"Yes. I thought you had arranged to meet here," Mrs. Ndzerem responded, trying to exonerate herself.

"Has he also just arrived?" Ntube asked lightheartedly.

"He came last night," Mrs. Ndzerem answered.

"That's OK. We did not need to arrange to meet here. It is a coincidence. It may not be the last, so long as you live and continue to be our point of convergence," Ntube responded.

Mrs. Ndzerem was overjoyed by that response. “Wonderful!” she exclaimed in her heart and opened up for conversation. She asked Ntube about her people and how she felt after they had left Atieg. Before Ntube responded, Mr. Ndzerem and Mr. Nsahbinla returned.

“Hi! Mary,” Mr. Ndzerem exclaimed when he saw Ntube. He raised his arms for an embrace. Ntube stood up in her regal excellence and embraced him. He hugged her for a minute and exclaimed, “What a pleasant surprise! What a wonderful coincidence! Or, did you by chance arrange to meet here?”

Ntube snivelled at the question, gave a sly smile and was about sitting down when Mr. Ndzerem pointed at Mr. Nsahbinla and reminded her to greet him. “I’m sorry,” Ntube apologized, cautiously stretched her cotton-soft hand at him and bade him good evening. Though she sounded distant, he gripped her hand with both hands for a long minute – a minute of poignant and apologetic thoughts; and with a choked whisper also bade her good evening, and then relaxed the grip. Ntube made two steps to her seat and sat down.

Mr. Ndzerem watched the exchange of greetings between the former husband and wife and entered his room apparently to change his clothes. Mr. Nsahbinla seized the opportunity to start a conversation.

“Mary, good evening once more,” he said with a voice strained with emotions. “I am extremely thankful to God for seeing you once again. I came here last evening to thank the Ndzerems for the wonderful care they gave me when I was hospitalized and to ask Mr. Ndzerem to find time to accompany me to your village to see you, and thank you for the fantastic assistance you gave me when I was virtually a corpse in hospital; and most of all to apologize for that insane inhumanity I exhibited on you. My guilt is beyond pardon, I

know; but it is better for me to seek pardon and be refused than to sit with arms folded. I am not making the apology now, far from that. I am just introducing a new Nsahbinla.”

Ntube hissed, suppressed an outburst of laughter then ruffled on the chair as if to respond. Mr. Nsahbinla held his breath. Mr. Ndzerem bumped into the parlour and disrupted the anticipated response.

“Have I eh, eh, eh disrupted your conversation?” he asked.

“Not really,” Ntube interjected. “My former husband was just warming up.”

“Warming up? That’s OK. Let’s reserve what we have to say till after dinner,” Mr. Ndzerem advised and invited the pair to table – asking them to choose whatever side of the table pleased them. Ntube sniggered, waiting for the men to choose their seats first. Mr. Nsahbinla dragged his feet to see what side Ntube would choose.

“This table is the puzzle of our lives. It has four sides; we are four. There is no way we can sit to avoid embarrassment. If we sit two on either side, we may find ourselves sitting to reflect a desired or an undesired aspect of our lives. If each of us sits on one side, we may reflect another aspect of our lives. So let the men sit at both ends and the women at both sides,” Mr. Ndzerem suggested and made Ntube and Mrs. Ndzerem sit facing each other and he and Mr. Nsahbinla facing each other.

“Mary, I am not an exquisite cook as you are. Please, help yourself with whatever I have in front of you,” Mrs. Ndzerem apologized.

“That’s exposing me to ridicule. Why don’t you address yourself to the guest of honour?” Ntube countered.

“Who is the guest of honour?” Mr. Ndzerem asked, surprised by Ntube’s brusqueness.

“Mr. Nsahbinla,” Ntube answered bluntly.

“I don’t think either of you is less important. You are welcome,” Mrs. Ndzerem defused the situation.

After the meal, they retired to the sitting room and were served some drinks. They drank in silence but each bubbling with the desire to start the conversation on the *raison d’être* of the coincidence. At last, Mr. Ndzerem broke the silence.

“Mary and Caius, you are both welcomed to this old home, a home which was or is, and may be dear to you as long as you live. Neither of us invited you here today. We simply saw you and are simply welcoming you. We thank God that He has made this happen and we pray that His will be done in this visit. Mary, when we visited you a week ago to pay homage to your late mother, we did mention your former husband Caius Nsahbinla. We did that out of concern for your wellbeing; we had mentioned you to him when we last visited him out of concern for him. Today, the supreme mystic that has more concern for you both than we have, has made it possible for you to meet. I would therefore ask my wife and me to surrender our presence to that omnipresent mystic to show his concern.”

When the Ndzerems stood up to leave, Ntube caught Nsahbinla’s stray glance which she interpreted as indicating that she should stop them from leaving.

“Pah,” she addressed Mr. Ndzerem, “why do you want to shove back the cat that has been let out of the bag? My former husband has told me why he came here. He said he came here to thank you for the care you gave him while he was in hospital and to plead with you to accompany him to my village to thank me for the same purpose, and to apologize for divorcing me. My coming here has saved him both time and money. I thank him most heartily for that gesture and forgive him a thousand times. That is the short

and long of it. It is rare nowadays to see offending husbands apologize to offended wives. Caius has always been special. When auntie mentioned him when you visited me in the village, I took offence and thought I was churlish in my response to her request that I reconcile with him. I considered my response transferred aggression and had to come here to apologize. I say transferred aggression for lack of a better expression. I owe Caius Nsahbinla no grudge. I owe nobody any grudge, and I am simply being frank. To say I should reconcile with Caius is tantamount to saying that we should put together what God had, has and will always put asunder. Yet, Caius Nsahbinla is to me, a wound on the forehead; or better still, spittle in the mouth. I believe I am the same to him. Like the puzzle of the sitting positions around the table, there is no absolute logic that can dispel disgusting meaning. I have come to apologize to you and if I did not meet him here, I would have sent him greetings. That is what is left of us now.”

“Mary,” Mrs. Ndzerem interjected. “You are right to sound bitter, resentful and downright revengeful. I know your ordeal is without measure. But I think it is not how low we sink in manifesting grief for wrongs done against us that we emerge supreme but how high we rise in ignoring and forgiving the wrongs. I believe saying that God had, has and will always put you asunder is an overstatement – an overstatement that I hold, does not reflect you and does not befit you, you I know very well.”

“Auntie, that is being too religious. See, when Nsahbinla and I lived together, we made several futile attempts to sanctify our union in church. We made several futile attempts at childbearing; in the end, we separated – you know how. What other proof does one need to say that God did not ordain our union? Although we are today separated, I bear his

name as a birthmark whether I am known as current or as former Mrs. Nsahbinla. I believe he too is sometimes described as the former husband of Mary Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. So you see, we bear each other's tattoo – he for better; I for worse. That to me is sufficient. Any other muddling may turn out to be more punitive,” Ntube explained.

“Mary,” Mr. Nsahbinla stepped in, “my stabbing guilt dumbfounds me. I feel I should not speak at all but I can't remain silent in the face of things. Before I made up my mind to visit you and confess my wrongdoing, I knew it was difficult nowadays to see offended wives willing to forgive offending husbands. That is why; I thought I had to stake my efforts on the benevolence and confidence of our beloved mentors, the Ndzerems. I acknowledge I have offended you beyond measure. Yes. But see, Mary; you stood by me when I was reduced to shit. At that time, fair-weather-friends and relatives fled; but you, help of the helpless, nurse of the miserable stood by me. You waived aside my wrongs and thought of the good old days. My sister told me what you did at the hospital and how that raised my ego and propelled the doctors and nurses to treat me with respect. She told me how you went an extra mile to rent a house into which you moved her and into which I moved when I was discharged from hospital – the house I am proud to tell you that I now own after buying it from its owner. Mary, I lack words to thank you. I lack words to tell you to forgive me. One of the reasons why I seek reconciliation with you is that, I won the case that nearly took my life; and by winning it, I won fortune. I am now pretty rich. I am not saying this to entice you but to tell you that we both worked for the fortune and we both must enjoy it. I know how hurt you are. You may not want to return to me again as a wife but I have this one

request to make – accept to share the fortune with me. You take half and I take half.”

“The essence of fortunes is handing them over to heirs. I have no heirs, so, I need no fortunes. I understand your good intentions. I need subsistence, and that, I surely have; that is the truth,” Ntube said firmly.

“Mary,” Mr. Ndzerem intervened, “I have listened to the two of you very keenly and have deciphered one common element – both of you acknowledge having created a relationship which now sticks on you like the shell of a tortoise and as such, is indestructible. You call it spittle in the mouth; which means, while some of it can be spat out, most of it is swallowed. Agreed, wrongs were made and crimes committed, but because of the indestructibility of that relationship, your best option is to mend fences. You are both near middle age or are middle aged, and I wonder whether it would be good for either of you to go starting from the scratch.”

“Pah, it depends on what you call starting from the scratch. To me, starting from the scratch means one’s disposition to evaluate the starting point. Some years back Caius and I started off as beggars, rose to imperial lords of Divisions then fell to nothingness in hospitals. Today he is starting from abundance; that is another starting point. Right now, I see myself starting from nothingness in the owl-and-bat-laden foothills of the land that gave me birth, the land I desecrated for Nsahbinla’s sake; that too, is another starting point. So, starting points are in vicious cycles.”

“Mary,” Mr. Ndzerem called in a voice edged with suppressed irritation, “we have gone right into the night and made no headway into our discussion. I pray we retire to our beds and think things over more maturely in bed. Good night.”

Ntube re-adjusted herself on her seat approvingly. Mr. Ndzerem got the message, stood up and left for his room. Mrs. Ndzerem showed Ntube her room – adjacent to that of Mr. Nsahbinla and also left. Just when she entered their room, there was a blinding flash of lightning followed by a deafening thunderclap, then a series of minor flashes and trembling of the sky that built up into an unprecedented deluge. While the storm pounded the roof Mr. Ndzerem listened attentively and thought the noise made by the rain was interlaced with sustained conversation emanating from Ntube's room.

"That matter is ended," he whispered to his wife."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because night rain solves marital problems a village council cannot."

"It's the working of God then!"

"For sure."

In the morning, Ntube got up in very high spirits. She tidied up the kitchen and the house – washed the overnight dishes, swept around and waited for Mrs. Ndzerem to come and tell her what would be prepared for breakfast. Mrs. Ndzerem was late in getting up – having slept late, thinking things over and fashioning out the most convincing bible quotations she would use in talking to Ntube in the morning. When she finally got up, she was dazzled by Ntube's briskness and general disposition. She entered the kitchen and saw the marvellous work Ntube had done. She dashed back to the room to whisper to her husband that she thought the deed had been consummated and the matter ended. She then went back to help prepare a sumptuous breakfast.

At the breakfast table Ntube was convivial and joked most of the time. That sort of disoriented the Ndzerems. Mr. Nsahbinla was reticent; in fact pensive, so-much-so-that by

the time they finished breakfast, none of them mentioned the reconciliation issue. In fact, they had taken it for a given. After breakfast, Ntube entered her room, got her handbag and briskly told her hosts she was returning to Atieg.

“So soon!” Mrs. Ndzerem exclaimed. “I thought you would be with us for about a week.”

“I can’t. I have left my dog and livestock behind. They are missing me. I must go.”

Mr. Nsahbinla exhaled noisily, took an apparently heavy envelope from his pocket and gave it to her. She took it with both hands and genuflected to show appreciation. Mr. and Mrs. Ndzerem gasped in admiration and also handed her an envelope. They then took her to the park. At the park, she hugged each of them tenderly and promised she would do all in her power to be in contact with them. She then entered the vehicle and bade them good bye.

Immediately Mr. Ndzerem wheeled the car out of the park, he noticed a sudden change in Mr. Nsahbinla’s countenance. He looked sullen, sunken and rumped. Taking that as a sign of great grief for missing Ntube, he threw in a joke.

“Caius, sometimes coincidental occasions yield better fruits. Mary is returning in very high spirits.”

“Yes, because she has consummated her desires.”

“What do you mean?”

“She has sealed the coffin of our negotiations by saying she has refunded my bride price.”

“How is that?”

“Last night when you asked us to retire to bed, I knocked at her door immediately the storm started. She opened it as if she was expecting me. I was so infatuated, so tensed, so appreciative that I went straight for a kiss. She rebuffed it and when I tried to shut the door to try again she pushed it ajar.

Undermined by my ravaged emotions, I went down on my knees, kissed her feet and pleaded with her to forgive me for any wrongdoing. I said I would pay a million fines. She sat me down on the bed and told me categorically that I was as good to her as a sloughed skin. That our relationship now was limited to the title and deeds of **former** – former Mrs. Nsahbinla, former bed mates, former helper, and former everything. She said that her people say, ‘a snake does not slough partially’. She then narrated how she refunded my bride price. She said her people gave her the bride price to refund to me in order to consummate our divorce. When she got to Victoria and found me in bad shape, she thought using the money to save me was better than giving it to people who would want to use it to celebrate my death. So, she used some of the money to treat me and the rest, she rented the house into which she moved my sister and into which I moved when I left hospital. She concluded that she was happy to tell me that, because I could still stake my claim on her with the thought that she still owed me bride price. Poignant as her statement was, I thanked her for saving me and said I owed her a million good turns. So, I pleaded with her to accept whatever I offered her. In spite of my insistence that she takes half of the fortune I have, she refused. I offered her 500,000 Frs. and the keys of the house I bought in Fiango but she refused. She said if I wanted to be benevolent to her, I could help her with transport money. The envelope I gave her this morning is only 50,000 Frs. I feel devastated. I am crushed. It hurts that she is so adamant. If she could only tell me that she has forgiven me, I would be satisfied.”

“I see your grief. A PWD caterpillar is broken down at Muambong near her village, when I shall go to repair it, I shall try to talk to her. We should not give up.”

“I believe if we want to retain cordial relations with Mary, we should give up trying to woo her back. She is so adamant, so uncompromising when it comes to reconciliation. See what intrigues she used to refund bride price. See how she exercises the doctrine of tooth for a tooth. See the gifts she reciprocated with what we took to Atieg. I shall not be surprised to see her bring gifts to the worth of the envelopes we have given her today in her next visit. She sounds friendly. She looks marvellous but the gall in her is beyond prediction. We better give up,” Mrs. Ndzerem advised.

Chapter Twenty Five

Ntube arrived Atieg on Monday evening having overstayed by a day. Etame whom she had asked to help take care of her compound in her absence was a little angry for that overstay. After curdling him and presenting him with gifts he brightened up.

“I am sorry for the one day delay. How are you?” she asked.

“I am fine. Only Dio has been restless. It whines, yelps and barks for no apparent reasons.”

“Perhaps because it was missing me. Has anybody looked for me? Did *Nyeh* Ebane come to look for me?”

“No. Only the HM came here two days ago and asked of you. He came with his dog.”

“Did he shoot any bats?”

“No. He did not, though he had a gun.”

“Why was he looking for me then?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about the tree-feller? He has not returned from Tombel?”

“He has not. It may be he will be longer than he promised. This is harvest season. He may want to help his uncle in harvesting cocoa.”

“Is there no other person who can fell that buma tree?”

“There is. There are boys who can do it but my fear is that they might make it fall on the road and block it. See, the tree is very heavy on the side of the road and so requires a skilful feller.”

“OK, then we shall wait for your friend.”

Etame was already on his feet ready to return with his gift of Congo bread – a delicacy he would have the pride that day,

to brandish to his family as a gift from Ntube. He bade her good night and sped past the gate, forgetting to lock it. A few minutes later, Ntube slumped into the wooden sofa to rest before making supper for herself. She did not have to worry about an elaborate supper. She had brought bread and sardine and would simply warm water and prepare herself ovaltine. As she lay in the sofa, several incongruous anxieties took possession of her – the most pressing being the desire to know the reason why the ‘wicked’ HM wanted to see her. He had said on the day of bat-shooting, “I can’t come here tomorrow,” why did he come there in her absence? She sighed apparently out of self-pity and stood up to get the things for her supper from the room.

Immediately she entered the room, she lost train of memory. As she tried to figure out what had led her into the room, she heard the gate whir. Then she heard Dio whine, then yelp, then grouse. She felt as if Dio’s whines, yelps and grouses were being interlaced with those of another canine. She doubted why Dio was not barking if a strange dog had intruded into the compound. Then she thought she heard light and smart pattering of paws around where Dio was tied followed by a long and plaintive wail and then a lull, then heavy and quick breathing apparently through the mouth. She tiptoed to the door to see what was happening to Dio, and lo! There Dio was, with its tongue dangling out and dripping with saliva. It was tugging it out tail to tail with another canine. She had seen the dog before but she could not remember where and when.

Mary Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python stood petrified – split between being angry and looking for a weapon to punish the intruder and being understanding and allowing it have its way. She settled for the latter and at once her hitherto fettered impulses ruptured into passion.

Although it was getting dark, although she thought she was alone in the compound, it was not a scene she could face full-faced. It was neither terribly repulsive nor wonderfully inviting. Split between avoiding it and appreciating it she withdrew a little inward and shut the door, creating a little opening big enough for only one eye to peep. That gave her ample latitude to appreciate the scene and cloak hidden shame and guilt for succumbing to the despicability of the scene. And as she peeped, her impulses boiled to fever pitch causing her to swallow hard spittle, hiss and squirm and ... Then she found herself whispering as if to Dio:

Take it, my beloved Dio
Emerge from the gallows of passion
Pull out of that monstrous despair
That has cloaked my life for years
And as you hit
The devouring brimstone of ecstasy
Be blessed with his fruit.

Enjoy your equality lucky Dio
For, who from a distance
Would distinguish in your union
A he from a she?
So, keep your secret closely hid
From king and priest alike,
And as you hit that exquisite excellence
Be blessed with his fruit.

The Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python took a long deep breath of self-pity and as she pushed the door to lock it and retire to bed to do battle with her raging impulses, she felt as if something was restraining the door. She pushed more

energetically to no avail and thinking the door had hit a pebble on the floor, drew it backwards to see what was blocking it. In the blur of the dimly lit house, emerged a figure that was restraining the door. She thought she had seen the person before but she could not remember where and when. Before she asked his intention, he called out, “Mary, Mary don’t lock me out. Mary I love you. Mary please!” The man’s voice sent shock waves into her ears. It was reminiscent of a voice she had heard before. It was strong, powerful and more enticing than repulsive. She relaxed her hold on the door and surrendered it to him. He locked it warily and confronted her.

“Mary please, I have been here twice and I was told you travelled. Please Mary, I love you.”

The words “I Love you,” resonated in Ntube’s ears like church bells. She stammered in feigned protest and dashed into the room. He pursued her into the room and gripped her most tenderly – his heart throbbing.

“What has brought you here – wicked thing?” she croaked, her voice broken by stretched nerves.

“You; kind woman. You,” he responded strongly and resolutely.

“For what? For what you wicked man?”

“For you,” he responded vividly, dragged her to him and embracing her – his broad chest enveloping her and making her reel with full masculine warmth she had missed for so long. A flash of delight coursed through her and rekindled her reasoning. In one split second the past unwound itself before her eyes and she recalled that exquisite day when under similar circumstances she had succumbed to Caius Nsahbinla’s, “Mary I love you.” The man held on and gave her a shove that jolted her out of herself.

“Leave me you useless thing. Leave me,” she protested weakly. He pressed on and locked a kiss on her jaw; then her mouth. She breathed in quick successions and hissed as she cried, “Let me remove it myself, let me remove it myself.”

How either of them removed it herself/himself is still to be conjectured. In a split second they were wriggling and constricting and twisting in a union completely different from that of Terrier and Dio. After hitting multiple ecstasies, they lay dejected like spent cartridges. In spite of that, the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python did not allow fatigue take the better of her. She was spent but alert and methodical. She looked at her watch, it was 5.14 a.m. She shook the HM and told him it was high time he left for his home. He got up, tidied himself up and as he was about to leave, Ntube asked teasingly, “Shall we continue tomorrow?” The HM looked at his watch and responded, “Not tomorrow but today and everyday till death do us part. Prepare me *sesse binage*.”

Ntube eyed him, pouted and said, “I thought you would say, ‘I can’t come here tomorrow’”. Then she opened the door, went out, peeped at both ends of the road and finding nobody, told him it was ideal to go.

Chapter Twenty Six

Mary Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python had a quiet day although time and again, her childhood experience with Nsahbinla, and her adulthood experience with the HM intruded into her mind and made her uneasy. The two experiences worried her because she feared she had fallen prey to the same trap. She remembered the saying, ‘once bitten twice shy,’ and asked herself whether in succumbing to the HM she wasn’t twice bitten? For sure, she was twice bitten and whoever is bitten twice is forever beaten. Poignant as that was, she consoled herself with the fact that with Nsahbinla, she was a child glowing with hope; with the HM she was an adult lost in hopelessness. There was no risk-taking in a venture deemed hopeless from the start – so, even if she fell out with the HM, she would not be disappointed. With that, she thought she would make it crystal clear to him that their relationship would not go beyond enigmatic night visits. There would be nothing like, for better or for worse as he had declared. Furthermore would he be so blind and deaf to want to sow on granite?

To dispel her worries she decided to occupy herself with preparing the *sesse* the HM had demanded. But after thinking things over and over again, she thought, if he came and met the *sesse* prepared as ordered; he would start developing careless imperial airs around her. That would be unacceptable and to discourage it, things had to be put in check right straight. So she took ordinary cocoyam and started peeling them to prepare him pounded fufu. She had not peeled eight when she saw him enter the compound. It was 6.30 p.m. He greeted her in the kitchen and majestically passed to the

house and sat down in the parlour. Anger bubbled in Ntube. She abandoned the cooking and met him in the parlour.

“Mr. HM, what is your time?” she asked with boiling anger.

“6.30 p.m.” he answered rather embarrassed.

“6.30 p.m. is broad daylight. What brings you here in broad daylight? I am scandalized. You want to break my privacy? Please return and never come here again.”

“Mary, is somebody contesting this compound with me? If so, I beg to apologize. I am sorry,” he supplicated.

“You don’t own a compound you contest with somebody nor does anybody own a compound he contests with you. All I’m saying is that you leave and never come here again. It is unacceptable that you parade here at will; very soon you will start hoisting flags and composing anthems and organizing legislations.”

“Mary, what makes you erupt in such vile, flaming anger, such eh, eh, eh? You are downright churlish, disdainful and bitter. I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you. I simply just couldn’t wait any longer. This place is isolated and I thought of coming to keep you company. I don’t see why you should be so enraged. I shall go but I pray, let’s not separate on a sour note,” the HM supplicated again and stood to go. He made a few steps, dragged his feet and looked back thinking Ntube would call him back. She did not.

Three days later, he came at 11.15 p.m. and knocked at the gate. Ntube opened the gate and allowed him in.

“HM, I gave you two weeks. You come after three days. What does that signify? Of course it signifies defiance.”

“Mary, you said 6.30 p.m. was broad daylight. I have come at this punishing hour to respect your word. If even that does not please you I can return and wait for the eleven

remaining days. Or you can allow me pass the night here in the parlour and leave very early in the morning.”

“You choose.”

“I shall return in the morning.”

Ntube left the HM in the parlour and went to her room. She locked it and slept. Early in the morning, she heard him opening the door to return. She got up and met him.

“OK, good day. If you like you can come in the evening. I shall prepare you *sesse*. Don’t come with your dog. Good bye.”

The HM took a deep breath, eyed her with mixed feelings and left. In the evening he was split between honouring the invitation and despising it. If he honoured it Ntube would assume untoward airs. If he did not, he could worsen the situation. After putting two and two together, he preferred worsening the situation than compromising his personality. So, he did not go. Ntube had prepared the *sesse* and waited in vain that evening. The next day she simmered it and waited again in vain. On the third day, he came.

“What happened? Were you sick? Your *sesse* is three days old. It is almost burnt with constant simmering. I would have thrown it away if you did not come today,” she said emphatically.

“You better throw it away. Who will eat three days old *sesse*? If I did not come it was because of your repulsive eh, eh, eh. Mary, tell me, who do you think you are?” the HM asked daringly.

“Mary Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python; as simple as that,” Ntube responded.

“And you think you can lord it over people with impunity because you are e, e, e, eh?” the HM asked with a tint of anger.

“Because I am what? I don’t lord things over people, I lady things over people. You think you can set standards for me? You will either eat the *sesse* or I throw it away. It is only three days old. I am several years old,” Ntube responded cynically.

“I shall eat it if you will eat with me,” the HM condescended.

“Did I say you would eat it alone? Or you think I have not been eating it?” Ntube responded with a reconciliatory tone, went to the kitchen, simmered the *sesse* and set the table. Then she took half a spoonful of the *sesse* and put in her mouth; and using the same spoon, took half a spoonful and asked the HM to open his mouth. He smiled and opened his mouth. She put the *sesse* into his mouth with a smile that ignited his nerves. He shivered with voluptuous expectation and rushed into reciprocity.

“Let me also feed you,” he requested with a quivering voice and took his spoon.

“No, you can’t do it. You can’t do it. I shall tell you why after dinner. Please let’s eat. Feed yourself. I am sorry, e, e, e I am sorry. It was a gross mistake,” Ntube apologized.

“It is not a gross mistake. It is your usual way of blowing hot and cold at the same time. It is your way of having the greatest effect with your dagger – set someone ablaze, and then pour mud-thick cold water on him. I am stabbed to death. I am torn apart – castrated by your e, eh, I lack words to, o, o, o,” the HM said in self-pity.

“Please eat. I shall tell you. I shall tell you. Don’t take offence,” Ntube begged.

“I have lost appetite. It hurts to be subjected to what you are doing to me. Your blowing hot and cold is devastating – downright vile and killing,” the HM said emphatically.

“That is an unfortunate evaluation of the truth. The world functions on the principle of blowing hot and cold – what goes up must come down. One should not be too excited with what is hot because it drops dead cold the next minute. Assumptions at what is hot or would be hot are very dangerous and can be very disappointing especially for a man like you. Let’s eat and if we have time, I shall tell you what I mean,” Ntube supplicated.

The HM made a tunnel view of her and shook his head. He ate in silence and after a while, put down his spoon and took a glass of water.

“Thank you very much. It was so delicious,” the HM appreciated.

“It would have been much more delicious if it were not stale. Like pudding, like cook,” Ntube joked.

“What do you mean? Stabbing cynicism. If that is what you call stale, I prefer stale to fresh,” the HM said frankly.

“That’s wrong premise. Nobody would do that. So, streamline your actions and wishes with the rest of humanity,” Ntube counselled.

“Mary, before you tell me what you want to, let me confide in you the bosom of my heart. I love you. I want to marry you. You see, you have forced me to be this blunt and sound brusque because I want an end to these seesaw exchanges. I believe if you knew what I stood for; you would not have driven me away for coming here in broad daylight.”

Ntube took a long breath, got up and cleared the table. Then she went to the room as if the answer to the HM’s request was hidden in the room. When she returned, she sat opposite him and held his hands.

“HM,” she addressed him, shaking his hands as if to ascertain that he was paying attention. “I am most honoured by your request. In fact I had expected it and what I wanted

to tell you was, to advise you against it. Now that you have made it, may I have the honour to discourage you from it? I am former Mrs. Nsahbinla – a name that sticks on me like a birth mark. That name rends and gnaws my heart every second of my life. I shall not like to be former Mrs. second person, especially former Mrs. somebody who likes me very much. So, while I do not imply that I am a ball readied for the field, I would advise you that while we remain close, you should be looking for a more suitable girl to marry. That would be the woman who would feed you and you would reciprocate with feeding her. Do you now see why I refused your feeding me? Please, don't insist. I am, so to speak, out of the question."

The HM did not respond. He pulled a long face, got up and went to the room. Ntube followed him and presently they were consuming the passions of each other as if laying the foundation of the rejected request. In fact the HM found it hard to reconcile the rejection and the degree of devotion. However, if they were not laying the foundation stone for marriage, they were laying one for a routine. And for the next four months the HM visited the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python four times a week from 11.00 pm to 5.00 am. As long as the routine lasted, the clangs of bats, the hoots of owls and wandering serpents did not exist. The two kilo meter trek from the Mission to Atieg meant nothing.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Ntube and the HM went on pretty well for four months. In the fifth month, the HM was summoned to Buea to take over the functions of the Permanent Secretary in the Governor's office. He left for Buea excitedly thinking his new status would boost his bid to woo Ntube. To keep her in suspense and thus have a greater impact, he went without seeing her. After taking over office, he returned to Atieg to break the news to her, propose to her again and get his things in the Mission. Unfortunately, he did not meet her. She had gone to Victoria to see her doctor. The HM, now the new PS returned to Buea and the next day very early in the morning drove to Victoria to see if he would by chance stumble on her. He stood by the main entrance of the hospital and waited. After a brief wait, a devastated Ntube emerged from the consultation room and was surprised to see the PS.

"HM what has brought you here?" she asked with suppressed anger.

"What else do you think would have brought me but you? I went to Atieg to see you and was told you had come down for treatment. So, I returned to Buea from where I have come this morning to see you. Mary, what's wrong? Before I left for Buea you were not sick – how comes that you look so emaciated?" the PS asked.

"I am a long standing patient. I usually come here for consultation," she responded and added, "Do you say I have emaciated? It may be you don't see well. People who know me here say I have put on weight."

"It's the people who don't see well. You are sunken, wrinkled and I, I can't tell what. Terrible!"

“It may be my journey took a heavy toll on me. I’m OK,” Ntube feigned good health.

“I doubt whether it’s the toll of the journey. Something more serious may be wrong with you,” the PS predicted.

The PS’s remark rent Ntube’s heart as she thought he had eavesdropped on her conversation with the doctor. And if that were right, he would be in the know of a secret she would want to keep closely hid even beneath her coffin lid. She had told the doctor that she was having intermittent vomit-inducing malaises for some weeks and developing cramps reminiscent of those of her early-life pregnancies. The doctor had examined her palms and eyes and asked her about the regularity of her menstrual cycle. She had told him of a sort of jumpy cycle attributable to her age.

“You may be pregnant,” the doctor had said calmly.

“What! At what age doctor? Have I become Sarah, Abraham’s wife?” she had asked and fallen into terrible melancholy.

“It happens, though rare. We have to ascertain with a series of tests. So, take this prescription and bring me the results as soon as possible,” the doctor had said.

Ntube had taken the prescription and decided not to do the tests. She had thought of returning to her village to die in her compound. Her early-life pregnancies had been terrible nightmares – a miscarriage, a stillbirth and an abortive caesarean. With that, she thought, an advanced-age pregnancy would surely take her life. It was in that tetchy state of mind that she emerged from the consultation room and met the PS.

“Mary, this is not Atieg where we did things in hiding. This is Victoria and we must be open. What is wrong with you? Tell me so as to take appropriate measures. You look horrible,” the PS remarked.

“Nothing is wrong with me. And even if it were, it would be personal requiring only my attention,” Ntube retorted.

“You are joking. Where do you stay? With whom are you living?” the PS asked.

“Where do you say you came from this morning?” Ntube asked.

“From Buea,” the PS answered.

“What are you doing there?” she asked.

“I was summoned there two weeks ago to take up the functions of the Permanent Secretary in the Governor’s office. I left rather abruptly but once I took over, I asked for permission to see you. On arrival at Atieg, I was told you had gone to Victoria for treatment. That’s why, I am here,” the PS explained.

“It was more feasible for you to go to Buea, then return to Atieg to see me? How wonderful that is! How great! Before I came here three days ago I had waited for you in vain for a couple of days. And thinking you had abandoned, I decided to travel. Yesterday, I made my rendezvous with my doctor and having seen him this morning, I believe I shall return tomorrow,” Ntube responded.

“I don’t think it would be wise for you to return in this state even if you were given drugs to take home. I would prefer you to stay on. But if you are not comfortable where you are, we move to Buea from where my driver would drive you down every morning to see your doctor,” the PS suggested.

“Move to Buea – the former capital of Southern Cameroon and now capital of West Cameroon, live with an unmarried man in a government house and parade in a government vehicle, *wa, wa*! What a feat! Scraping old scars? If it was convenient for you to leave Baseng, go to Buea and then go to visit me at Atieg, it would be convenient for me to

leave Victoria, return to Atieg, come and visit you in Buea and come and see my doctor here,” Ntube said cynically.

“Mary, you are making a joke of a very serious situation. Please, I know I might have wronged you. But let’s not eh, eh, eh...”

“Life is making a joke of us. There is no serious situation – it’s just life jesting with us.”

“Take it more serious. If you don’t like to live with me, I can give you one of the guest houses. Please, I mean it.”

“I understand. The plain truth is that, I can’t stay here for more than four days. I have done two and would return tomorrow.”

“OK, I shall visit you next week. Please be sure to be at home.”

“I shall,” Ntube responded and they parted in a more reconciliatory note.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Ntube returned to Atieg the next day without seeing her doctor. As soon as she got near her compound, Dio started yelping and struggling to break loose. Etame untied it and it bounced off to the gate. On seeing its mistress, it barked, rolled on the ground and leaped up to kiss her hands. Ntube reciprocated with equal warmth. On trying to lift it, she realized it was too heavy – in fact it was getting to full term. She patted it on the back and calmed it down. When it finally calmed down, she turned her attention on Etame. She asked him about the livestock and visitors. Etame said only the HM and *Nyango* Ebane came.

“When did the HM come?” she asked.

“Late in the night. At about 10 o’clock,” Etame responded.

“What did he say he came for?” Ntube asked feigning anger.

“I don’t know. When I told him you had gone to Victoria, he left without saying a word,” Etame explained.

“And *nye* Ebane? When did she come and why did she come?”

“She came very early in the morning to give you *hinage* and some oil. The things are in the kitchen.”

“They both decided to visit at odd hours,” Ntube remarked, opened her bag and gave Etame some bread. Etame received the bread with great joy and left for his compound.

Once Etame left, Ntube fell into depression. She blamed herself for not doing the tests the doctor had recommended and returning without seeing him. She entered her room and lay down to rest. She soon dozed off and before long; she

dreamt she was fishing by the side of Ndibendile (the big waterfall). She thought the noise made by Ndibendile was interlaced with the cries of men, women and children. At one point, she thought she heard a voice call her and tell her not to fear. It told her nothing would happen to her. It said she should be steadfast. When she appealed to the speaker to reveal herself to her, she woke up drenched with sweat.

“Oh! This terrible nightmare again,” she exclaimed, got up and went out to refresh herself. On seeing her, Dio went wild again with excitement. It leaped up to kiss her hands but in her disturbed temper, she cudgelled it away. Disappointed, Dio made a few steps away from her, squatted and started licking its genitals. Ntube eyed it with mixed feelings and said,

Blessed are those who know no fear
Nor anticipate mishap in childbirth
They yelp and make merry
Even at the brim of dreadful uncertainty.

Oh! That I were you, lucky Dio
With no sad memories of smoky love tunnels
I would caress my Terrier a thousand times
And roll in the fuelled flames of passion.

She sighed, returned to the house and dug out a cola nut from her head bed, split it and ate two lobes to suppress surging nausea. She felt better for a brief while, a very brief while; then she ruptured into intense vomiting. After emptying her bowels she ate another lobe of cola nut. *Nyango* Ebane who had seen Etame in the village and enquired about Ntube and was told that she had returned, hurried to pay her an impromptu visit. She was still a distance away when she

heard the violent vomiting. She burst into the house not minding whether Dio would attack her or not.

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, what is wrong? You returned with an illness?” she asked.

“Yes, I think the food I ate in Victoria was not agreeable. I have nausea and I vomit.”

“What do you use to suppress the nausea?”

“I use cola nut.”

“You don’t have *ndume*?”

“I have.”

“Use it. It has more lasting effect. Tomorrow, I shall bring you a more effective bark. Did Etame show you the *binage* I brought?”

“He did. Thank you very much. I don’t know how I shall repay you.”

“I am not doing you any favour. I am just doing a mother’s duty. I am just trying to fit into your mother’s shoe. She was a great woman. I still admire her.”

“Thank you once more.”

“At this stage, if there is anything you want me to do, don’t hesitate to ask me do it.”

“What stage do you mean?” Ntube retorted thinking *Nyango* Ebane had speculated rightly on the cause of her malaise.

“No, I just say, if you need help you should not be shy in asking for it.” *Nyango* Ebane feigned ignorance.

“OK, thank you. Can you prepare me *ekwang*?”

“I’ll do it this night and bring it tomorrow morning. Use *ndume* to suppress nausea. God bless you and good night,” *Nyango* Ebane said and returned.

The night was not however good to Ntube. Because she had eaten a lot of cola nut, she suffered from terrible insomnia – worsened by the weird clangs of bats and hoots

of owls. In the morning when *Nyango* Ebane brought her the *ekwang* she told her to tell Etame to come. Etame soon came.

“Etame, has the tree-feller not returned from Tombel?” Ntube asked.

“He has. I even told him that you wanted him to fell the tree and gave him the money you gave me to give him. He refused on grounds that the tree was not an ordinary tree. It was a totemic tree – possessed by ancestral spirits.”

“What ancestral spirits would choose a *buma* tree – soft white wood for a totemic tree? Tell him I want him to fell that tree,” Ntube said and sighed with scorn.

Etame carried out his mission and the tree-feller felled the tree. Unfortunately, in spite of his expertise the tree fell across the road, blocking it and thus isolating the clan from the main road and Mission. The people made a difficult by-pass that led to many accidents and that generated much talk about Ntube’s unilateral destruction of ancestral landmarks. For two weeks the people spiritlessly tried to clear the branches and chisel out a narrow path across the huge trunk on the original road. Tempers boiled as they worked, and as they sighed and grumbled some suggested that Ntube be brought before the council of the clan once more to answer charges of wanton destruction of more sacred monuments – the defunct grove behind her father’s compound and the *buma* tree.

While this was heating up and the sages of the land were secretly fashioning out charges against the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, her condition worsened and she decided to return to the hospital. She thought instead of having a prolonged and painful wait on death it would be better if she sought medical intervention to at least mitigate the situation. She called Etame and showed him round her compound.

“Etam’,” she addressed him. “How many people do you see here?”

“Not one,” he answered.

“OK, I want you to keep this compound again for the one week I intend to stay out or keep it for good if I don’t return. There is nobody to contest it with you if I happen to pass away. Only my aunt *Neb* Ahone would have had the prerogatives to inherit it. But she is too old now. My worry is that I had wished to bury her. But as things stand now, she may painfully bury me. When I go and people ask you where I am, tell them I am in the Mission. Don’t tell even *Nyeh* Ebane where I have gone to. Do you hear?”

“Yes, I have heard.”

The next day, the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python left Atieg in confusion. Before she reached the main road she was not sure where she was going to. She foresaw an unfortunate situation in Victoria if she went there and was admitted in the hospital. Victoria was a small township where everybody knew everybody. If Mr. Nsahbinla and the PS got wind of her admission, they would surely behave unpredictably. She thought her state was a personal affair and she would want to handle it without interference. She had had experience of an anaesthetic state – a state one is helpless and cannot ward off what she thought would be undesired benevolence. She imagined that if she were anesthetized and Mr. Nsahbinla came to reciprocate her kindness to him, she would be unable to protest. In like manner she thought the PS could come around and disturb her peace. By the time she got to the main road she settled on going to Manyemen hospital instead. Nobody knew her at Manyemen and if she died there, she would die a more agreeable death.

Two days after her departure, the PS got to Atieg. Etame told him she had gone to hospital.

“Is she still sick?” he asked astonished.

“Yes,” Etame answered.

“We might have by-passed each other on the way or in Kumba. OK, good bye,” the PS said, and left to search for her in Victoria.

Nyango Ebane did not know Ntube was not at home. Four days after Ntube’s departure was Ngomboku market day. Early in the morning, *Nyango* Ebane got a big basket into which she put three pieces of firewood, a basket-of-the-child, a red cord and a bowl and went and sat where the people had chiselled out a narrow path in the trunk of the tree. Every woman who passed there and of course all passed there, having abandoned the difficult by-pass, ‘threw’ gifts into the containers.

“*A nyeh Eban’*,” one middle aged woman addressed her. “For which of your daughters newly married and pregnant are you asking for collective help?”

“I would have long collapsed if I were to answer questions from donors. If you have, donate. If you don’t have, pass. Those who give freely find easily,” *Nyango* Ebane responded.

The woman threw a five hundred francs note into the basket-of-the-child and ululated with *Nyango* Ebane. The ululation sort of clicked open the other women’s minds and they started asking for whom *Nyango* Ebane was begging. In the olden days, elderly women begged for pregnant disadvantaged women. Who was the disadvantaged woman in this case? Late in the evening when the last women had returned from the market, *Nyango* Ebane invited four women to carry the gifts to Ntube’s house.

“*A nyeh Eban’*,” one of the women addressed *Nyango* Ebane. “Was it for Ntube that you were asking for collective charity? What is wrong with her?”

“It is not everything one sees done that she must find out the reason for which it is done. Whether there is something wrong with her or not, let’s not question,” *Nyango* Ebane responded and they returned to their respective houses.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Gossip on the felling of the tree that blocked the road intensified while Ntube was away. After eight days in hospital, she returned to Atieg to collect more dresses for her stay in Manyemen. The doctor had told her that everything was OK with the pregnancy but that she had to be around for minute by minute surveillance. Upon arrival at Atieg, Etame told her of the raging gossip. He said the people had come several times to tell her to clear the road of the branches and trunk of the huge tree. They had even gone to the Mission to look for her.

“Why didn’t you tell the tree-feller to invite a work cooperative? They would have done that work in a day,” Ntube remarked.

“Work cooperatives are charging very highly.”

“Because they think nothing can be done? Taking undue advantage? Go to Nkinchong and buy kerosene for me. Go fast. That tree trunk and branches will not be there tomorrow. It has a hollow at both the upper and lower sections and as such most of its interior is dry,” Ntube said.

Etame dashed off and presently brought kerosene. Ntube asked him to split an Indian bamboo and remove the middle segments so that the split bamboo could be used as a gutter to channel the kerosene into the hollow of the trunk. Late in the evening when she thought nobody would be using the road, she took Etame to the tree, had the kerosene infused into both sections of the tree, stuffed them with dry leaves and twigs and set them on fire. At the early stages the tree emitted thick smoke; but by midnight there was a blaze of proverbial proportions. In the morning, only smouldering ash was left of the tree.

The Atieg people were flabbergasted with the disappearance of the huge tree. They could not understand that a tree so huge and still wet could burn out as if it had been felled several years back. Some sang Ntube's praises and said the tree was a menace in the dry season when it shed cotton that dirtied the whole village.

Nyango Ebane was extremely happy to hear people speak positively about Ntube. She rushed to her house and presented the donated things. Ntube was very thankful. Manyemen is not rich in foodstuff. So when she was returning four days later, she carried a lot of the foodstuff the women of the clan had donated. Three days after her departure, the PS got to Atieg to say he had combed all the nooks and crannies of Victoria and even Tiko but has not seen Ntube.

"She came here eight days ago and returned four days ago. I do not know to which hospital," Etame said frankly.

"How was she? Still sick?" the PS asked.

"She looked better."

"If she comes again, find out where she is. I want to see her at all cost. So when I next come you should tell me where she is," the PS said and returned.

Five weeks after Ntube's return to Manyemen, a terrible calamity befell the clan. For the next two months the elderly sages of the land were dying like sprayed locust. The tempest worsened by the minute forcing mostly young men to flee to Western Bakossi and Yoge. The paramount chief convened the clan council at Ekenzu to discuss the calamity and ways to combat it. In opening the discussions, he stood up and addressed his people.

"People of Mbuogmut, I salute you. There is none of us here who does not know why we have come here today. We have come here to put our heads together and come out with

a solution on what is putting an end to our clan. I believe there is no family in this clan which has not tasted the bitter truth of the calamity that has hit us. Our clan is being depopulated by death and migrations. There is none of us here who is sure of seeing the next day. I open the floor.”

“Chief and people of Mbuogmut,” *Sango* Nzegge addressed the people. “Bakossi people say, if you keep something far away, you look for it far away. If you keep something nearby, you look for it nearby. The raging tempest that is devastating this clan is not strange to me. If a tortoise loses its shell what becomes of it? Did you think Mbuogmut would lose its shell and still live?”

The assembly remained quiet trying to get the meaning of what *Sango* Nzegge had said.

“*A Sango* Nzegge,” *Sango* Ebue addressed *Sango* Nzegge. “The whole assembly is quiet because they have not understood your proverb. Be more explicit.”

“People of Mbuogmut, what I mean is that, we have been denuded. The abodes of our gods and spirits have been destroyed. And when such things happen, especially if totemic animals have no places to hide, they are easily shot by hunters and their possessors die as a result. Just cast back your minds – where is the Brook-of-the-serpent? What happened to the serpent? Where is the defunct grove? Where is the *buma* tree? And most of all, what became of our ritual items? You thought with the destruction of those sacred abodes and things Mbuogmut would remain unpunished?” *Sango* Nzegge asked.

The assembly remained petrified and dumfounded for a long time. Only the whistle breathing of those with difficult breathing was heard. At last, *Sango* Muele of Ngolo stood up and said:

“*A banyang*, what is hidden under the bed is easily found. It is the same parrot that has eaten the plums. I had long suspected a link between our debacle and the destruction of our ancestral shrines. So, we can’t waste time anymore. Let us invite the *man-woman* responsible to this council to answer charges of wanton destruction of our clan.”

“Sages of this land,” *Nyango Ebane* retorted, “I stand up to tell you that if it is the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python we are talking about we should postpone this meeting. Some months ago, I diagnosed her pregnant. When I ascertained that I was right, I solicited collective donation for her. Every Mbuogmut woman here and even some men donated something and by so doing, we took collective oath and solidarity on behalf of our clan to protect her. It is not in Bakossi tradition for a pregnant woman to be brought before a council or be discussed anywhere. There should be no gossip against her anywhere, else; we would bear the blame for any misfortune that befalls her. I know that if we had known that she was pregnant, we would not have assembled here today.”

“Didn’t I say it? Whenever there is reason beyond doubt to punish Ntube, some mystical power intervenes. Is it this time she had to be pregnant? How long has she been separated from her husband and who has ever seen her with a man here?” Ebong from Kodmin asked and looked round to see a guilty male face. Not a single young man around showed signs of being her lover.

“And there we are again – not one of us has shown signs of being responsible for her pregnancy. Once more we are being dragged into the puddle of getting contaminated with catarrh from the muzzle of a dog. I would have said that it was a conspiracy if I did not know the calibre of woman *Nyango Ebane* is. Nine months and three months wait won’t

kill all of us. So, I move that we respect the solidarity of women,” Ebong concluded.

The clan was tongue-tied and so the paramount chief adjourned the meeting for the twelve months wait.

Chapter Thirty

Immediately the PS entered Ntube's ward and she saw him and he saw her suckling her three day old bouncing baby boy; they were overwhelmed by a confused feeling of love and hate, praise and condemnation and apology and defiance that found expression only in prolonged gazing at each other. The PS had stood petrified two steps short of Ntube's bed. After some time he picked up courage, took two steps forward, got to the bed and placing his right hand on her shoulder said, "Mary is this what made you so waspish, secretive and evasive? Is this the load you wanted to carry alone even at the edge of danger? You forgot for every night there is a day? Our people say a loud laugh exposes the molars. Your loud laugh has exposed our molars. Congratulations. Do your people know about it?"

"You know about it, isn't that sufficient? Welcome," Ntube responded as she felt the warmth of human touch pulsate in her heart. She made two dazzling gazes at the PS. He caught the gazes, bent down and kissed her on the left cheek. When he was about to withdraw, Ntube raised her right hand onto his head and directed his mouth onto her mouth and as they got locked in a passionate kiss, tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Thank you Mary," he whispered and added, "You have turned this whole thing into eh, eh, eh. I have been relentless in searching for you not because I suspected you were pregnant but because I feared you were seriously sick. It seems as if even in Atieg nobody knew you were pregnant until a certain Madam Ebane revealed it to the assembly of the clan. According to what your tough house-keeper (whom you might have instructed never to tell people about your

whereabouts) told me, your clan had conspired to bring you before the clan council to answer charges on the destruction of ancestral shrines. Madam Ebane intervened and said that in Bakossi tradition pregnant women don't stand trial; and so, because you were pregnant, the meeting should be adjourned till you gave birth. The conspirators then adjourned the meeting. When I heard this I became more anxious to search for you. I pressed on the boy to tell me where you were and after a drawn argument he speculated that you might be here at Manyemin. I have come. I have seen you. I have seen the truth about you. When I was leaving Buea for Atieg, I was in search of a patient. I have instead seen a nursing mother. My task is more complex now – especially as it has been compounded by the fact that Atieg is not a safe place for you and the child. Like Joseph therefore, I shall have to take you to Buea – the Egypt of this situation. When will you be discharged?"

"Once the child is circumcised and the wound heals I shall return to Atieg. I was born there, I grew up there. I shall die there. There is no place as safe for me as Atieg is. When I return to my father's compound, those who have axes to grind with me will meet me there."

"Mary, will you want to expose this child to danger?"

"When I get to Atieg, I shall call the people of Mbuogmut clan and show them the child and tell them, this is your child if you want to kill him, don't hesitate. If they kill their child, where is the problem?"

"Mary, and what about me? Where do you place me? If your people kill our child in revenge of what you have done to them what will become of me; knowing the child is ours fifty, fifty?"

"Does he who picks a windfall own the tree?"

“Mary, that is farfetched logic. I would say yes in this case. Once the tree is in danger, he who picks the windfall, he who knows what it takes to pick a windfall, he who defies the clangs of bats, the hoots of owls and the hisses of crawling snakes and is as such ready to protect the tree, owns it. In this case, I own the tree. Yes.”

“You have not begun owning. You have still a long way to go.”

“Let’s leave that now. We need not split our knobby wood in hospital.”

“Where else shall we split it?”

“Where I shall determine. If the matron comes now and tells me when you will be discharged, I shall come and collect you and take you where I want.”

“As a what? With what prerogatives? What authority has an empty hand over the mouth?”

“I shall show you that it has.”

“You are mistaken. I was once the wife of a District Officer. You know it. I once rode in private and government vehicles in Buea and Victoria – when power wore the aura of the white man and not the *nyamankundu* make-believe you call power today.”

“And that is why you are so venomous, uncouth and scary? What is wrong with you Mary? You don’t even have the courtesy of appreciating my concern for you – having looked for you all over the place and tracing you in this difficult place? You don’t even think I deserve a kind word from you?”

“But I kissed you now? What else do you want? I kissed you, a kiss that speaks a million kind words. OK, to show that I care, the child is on my left, come and sit on my right. The problem with you is that you always overstep your

bounds. When you are given the foreleg, you choose the hind leg – forgetting that the hind leg is the leg of oath-taking.”

“And because you think I cannot take oaths, you want to relegate me to the background? Let me tell you, I am no longer a teacher. I am the Permanent Secretary in the Governor’s Office. D. Os work under me.”

“Now, I must fall from the ladder, right?”

Before the PS responded, the nurse who had led him into the ward came in to announce that visiting time was over and the matron would soon start the evening rounds.

“Can you ask audience for me? I want to talk to her.”

“Not when she is making rounds; when she returns to her office. Yes.”

“Thank you in advance,” the PS said and was about to follow the nurse to the waiting room when Ntube sighed, held him and asked the nurse to give them a minute. The nurse moved out shutting the door behind her.

“Please, I just want to find out why you want to see the matron,” Ntube enquired.

“I want to ask her when they would circumcise the child, how long it would take for the wound to heal and the purported hospital bill and thus plan when I shall come for you,” the PS explained frankly.

“You see, there again you go wrong. You are going to see the matron on what concerns me; then, without hinting me, you take the pomposity of a white man’s scabies to go and discuss what I consider my personal affair? That is horrible. Be rest assured that if you go and see her she would consider you very strange. So don’t go and betray us – you and me before her. When I came here and was filling the hospital admission form I said, I was an independent single; meaning that I had no husband, no boyfriend, and no relative and would have no handler if things went wrong. I thus arranged

with the hospital authorities on what to do with my remains if things went bad. I paid in advance the speculated cost of my hospitalization to full term; and since we expected the worse only at delivery time, I hired the ambulance in advance and gave the driver the roadmap to Atieg. Then I signed a contract with some grave-diggers I thought would handle my remains into the ambulance. So, do you see why it was necessary for you to hint me? I don't say you are wrong in showing concern but I am against showiness."

"Mary, I am mortified, completely crushed. You have the guts to juxtapose my devotion to you with the yelling conspicuousness of the scabies of a white man? How scary; what vile! Have those words that undermine the warmth of a million kisses come from your mouth? Now, let me tell you what you are trying to evade. There is only one situation in which it is believed the conception of a woman was not attributable to a man. Only one, one. There is no way therefore that people who will see you with this child will not attribute him to a biological father – **mme**. Behind every successful pregnant woman is a successful impregnating man. So, whatever you did, are doing and will do shall be attributed to **mme**." The PS said emphatically and left to see the matron.

Immediately the nurse led him in, he introduced himself to the matron, praised her for the marvellous work they were doing, the cleanliness of the hospital and the overwhelming spiritual overtone of the environment. He then presented his problems – he wanted to know when his child would be circumcised, how long the wound would take to heal and how much hospitalization and sundry services would cost.

"We owe your wife a lot of money if she were to be discharged today. I wonder why she did not tell you she paid everything in advance. I am even more surprised to see you.

When she came here, she said she had nobody, no husband, and no boyfriend in all the earth and we should take her as our sister in Christ. She then went on to pay in advance, all projected bills, and most of all, ambulance and burial bills. We did not believe her until she gave birth without a relative by her side. As God would have it, in spite of her age and previous childbirth problems, she delivered smoothly. We would discharge her when she wants – depending on our not being flooded with emergency cases. She is a wonderful woman, convivial, smart and very sociable. She feels very comfortable with us but I think having stayed here for so long, I shall want to see her off in three weeks. The room in which she is, is hardly occupied. So, if she is not in a hurry, we shall keep her.”

“Thank you once more matron. It has been wonderful. Good night,” the PS said and bowed as he suppressed the embarrassment. He went back to Ntube’s room and bade her good night. The next morning he went and saw her and after a brief while returned to Buea.

Chapter Thirty One

Three weeks after his return from Manyemin, the PS got a brand new Land Rover and set off to collect Ntube. On arrival, he held a small ceremony with the nurses and other workers to thank them and apologize for the extra work Ntube's state had made them do. On their part, the matron and the nurses expressed admiration for Ntube – a woman of high calibre, but sober and very approachable.

The PS had decided to drive himself in order to converse freely with the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. At first, neither of them spoke. After covering some distance, Ntube broke the silence.

“Father of my child, if somebody, especially an Atieg person sees the two of us in this vehicle what will he say?”

“He will say, seeing the child that I went to collect my wife from the hospital.”

“Will he be right?”

“He will not because you have put a wedge in the whole thing. You are an impediment in the realization of the project.”

“I am asking that because I don't want you to insist on seeing me off right to Atieg when we get to the big field. You will leave me there and continue your way to Buea. I shall then send for Etame and his friends to come and carry my things.”

“You still insist on keeping this whole thing secret?”

“Have I any choice? I don't have a choice. I don't.”

“See Mary, you have a choice. I don't want you to risk the life of my child. That place is hostile to you. They will surely

kill the two of you; and therefore me. I feel I should drive straight to Buea.”

“Attempt it. Let me see you not branch to Tombel when we arrive Mambanda and you will see me jump out of your moving vehicle with the child. You know what that means.”

“I know. I know your ruthlessness. Mary, how is it that your proverbial beauty harbours the venom that comes out of your mouth? You would commit suicide because I want to drive you to safety?”

“You see you again? Please drive slowly; my son is in this car. You are almost losing your bearings and driving carelessly.”

“You drive me mad.”

“To commit suicide and kill me and my son by driving recklessly?”

“OK, let’s stop the conversation.”

“We shall converse. We shall. I want you to listen to me attentively. How many times did Peter deny Christ? Before denying him, what did Peter say? When the time for the test of willpower and promise came didn’t he curl his tail between his legs like a lame dog? I want to advise you vehemently not to choose the hind leg when you have the option of choosing the foreleg. The hind leg is an oath-taking leg. What do I mean by this? To eat the hind leg, you should be well entrenched, well implanted in *abon* society. Those who eat the hind leg dance *abon* with two black *elob* – stainless black *elob*. What a prestige-wielding position! But when they transgress the laws of *abon*, or are unable to fulfil their obligations, their fines are scary; unbelievably inhuman – they are fined animals with no fur on their bodies. Do you know what that means? So, don’t take the eating of hind legs from the prestige and enjoyment perspective only. Consider the adverse side also. And it is this adverse side that my love for you compels me to

dissuade you from venturing into it. All that glitters is not gold and can never be. To be the father of my son, that is, for me to proclaim you father of my son, is slithery. You will have to show that you will not turn tail as Peter did. You talk of marriage as the epicentre of that. I have told you and I am still categorical about it, I can't marry again. I can't. The only thing I reap from marriage is pain and disgrace. The Englishman says, 'once bitten twice shy,' but to me, 'once beaten there's possible revenge but twice beaten forever beaten'. I don't need a second disgrace and unbearable pains. This child has come as a surprise to both of us. If I had given pregnancy a 0.5% possibility, I would not have gone on the lovemaking spree I went with you to the point of getting pregnant, because of the stakes. The child has come and according to you, he is the big laugh that has exposed our molars. I shall be nursing the child at Atieg – across a big stream. You have risen in status – you can't be expected to do things clandestinely anymore; that is, visiting us at night. And this is the crux of the matter. Since it won't be possible for you to visit us at night, close your mouth and so hide your molars. I can't allow you visit me in the day and expose myself to ridicule – ridicule that I once had a relationship with Nsahbinla a Bamenda man, and returned empty handed and ventured out again though not with a Bamenda man, to return empty handed. So, brave the bull – take it by the horns. Let's shut our mouths now that nobody knows about it. It would be safer and cheaper for you. That is what I wanted to tell you."

"Mary, I understand your point. You don't want to marry again, fine. But that can't stop my attachment to you and the child. Because of that I suggest that I buy a plot at the big field and build you a house there on the main road. As I return, look for a plot there and in my next visit we'll buy it

and build. With that, you will be removed from your hostile people and would be near the Mission,”

“Disgrace number one – abandon my father’s compound and clan-land and settle on another clan’s land – leaving my people enclaved on the other side of the river. I can’t do that.”

“What do you call your people – bloodhounds who are after your life?”

“Which soothsayer did you see? That is farfetched, escapist’s talk.

“What do you mean by escapist’s talk? You have started spraying words you don’t know their meaning.”

“Escapist’s talk means; running away from issues; behaving the ostrich. And the issues are that, when I was the wife of Nsahbinla, there was a budget allocation for the construction of a bridge across our river. When he could not father a child with me, he dropped the project. If you could spray words you knew their meanings, you would have told me that you have seen the abandoned file and was doing something to re-activate it. I once mentioned it to you the day you missed a step on the stepping stones and fell in the river at night. Instead of returning, you got to Atieg drenched. The file is in your office – the PS’s office. It is lying there because Atieg has no sons and daughters working in the Governor’s office. If there is a bridge across that stream, you would visit us by day and night. She, who gets contaminated by catarrh from the muzzle of a dog, should be a proud eater of games. That is what I wanted to tell you.”

The PS sighed without comments after listening to that pattering for more than an hour. When Ntube ended she expected a response. None came for a long time. She got worked up.

“Peter, the cock has crowed twice. What’s your response?”

“The bridge is built.”

Chapter Thirty Two

The way the PS responded to Ntube's demand played havoc on her. She did not know whether to believe or disbelieve him. He had said it like an accidental fart and remained silent till they got to the big field.

"This is the big field. You say I should not see you off right to your house. I can't insist. You will carry the baby then, go home and send your house-keeper and other children to come for your things. I shall wait till they come," the PS said, got down the vehicle and helped her down.

"Thank you," she appreciated, unwound the veil she had covered the child's face with and asked the PS to kiss him. Then she made him kiss her too. After a long passionate embrace, she took off. When she was about to disappear at the other side of the field, she stood and waved. Passion overwhelmed the PS. He dashed to where she was waving, gripped her and kissed her again and again and again and made her kiss the child again and again. Ntube hissed and burst into tears and in the midst of a hiccough whispered, "Father of my son, you are so wonderful! Twilight of my ebbing days, you are so soothing!" The PS responded with, "My darling, you are so enticing, so wholesome, so marvellous and for sure I shall be lame in heart for the rest of my life if I miss you for good. Mary, I love you."

"You will not miss us. But let me tell you father of my son, to every coin, there are two sides – the crown and the tail. If you throw up the coin, only one side faces up and the other down. I have chosen to face down because, twice beaten forever beaten. Please, as you think of me, don't forget to look for the side that would face up. If you do, you

will be doing me a favour,” Ntube said and burst into tears again.

“Take heart my darling. I have heard your advice and I promise you, the bridge is built.” the PS reiterated. Ntube drew her nose, then left and when she got home, she sent Etame and two other boys for the rest of the things.

Chapter Thirty Three

The conspiracy to have Ntube answer charges had intensified with the deaths of more elderly people in the clan. Some people thought immediately she returned, whether with child or not she would be summoned to the clan council at Ekenzu. Things had heated up to boiling point. Some aggrieved persons blamed *Nyango* Ebane for causing a division in clan opinion. On her part, she defended herself by saying she did not institute the supremacy dictum of pregnancy over all other cultural matters. She said she would bring Ntube to the council once she found that conditions were conducive.

Nyango Ebane's compound was close to that of *Sango* Nzum'Ebong who was very ill. Once Ntube got home, she sent Etame to tell her that she had returned from hospital and would want to see her.

"How has she returned?" *Nyango* Ebane asked with a trembling voice.

"She is very well."

"Is that how she has returned? Is that all?" she asked again with great anxiety.

"She has returned with a fat big baby boy."

Nyango Ebane yelled and screeched with over joy. Then she shrieked and burst into singing with a cracked voice reminiscent of crying. "I am exonerated, I am vindicated," The whole village rushed to *Sango* Nzum'Ebong's compound thinking he had died. They met his wife feeding him. Then they heard the shrieking and singing coming from *Nyango* Ebane's house. They rushed there and on enquiry, she told them that the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python had put down her load; that is, she had delivered safely and had

returned home. While the village women rushed to Ntube's compound, *Nyango* Ebane remained behind to simmer the food of the ancestors for her. *Nyango* Ebane was lucky. She had expected her uncle that evening and left some food for him, but he did not turn up. So she combined the food with that of the ancestors and thus had something substantial. The food of the ancestors is food the Bakossi people leave overnight for visiting ancestral spirits to eat.

While Etame was away, Ntube set up the cot and placed the child in it. She then shrouded it with intricate netting that the village women could not undo. The women who rushed in wanted to carry the baby as it is the custom but Ntube forbade them on grounds that the child was tired after a punishing long drive and also because the matron did not recommend the carrying of babies out of cots when they were sleeping. That displeased the women and tuned down their excitement. When *Nyango* Ebane came, things changed. She whispered something into Ntube's ear, gave her food, and while she was eating, *Nyango* Ebane tore the cot open. "Who says you will not carry Mbuogmut? Mbuogmut is born – your child has been born. This is him," she said and stretched out the child she had taken from the cot to the public. The place echoed in ululations and dance. When Ntube finished eating, she joined in the singing and dancing. It was now very late in the night. The women had danced unprepared. There was neither food nor drinks to sustain them. So they dispersed. But before they did so, Ntube announced that the naming ceremony would take place on Good Friday and all the villages of the clan were invited.

Before Good Friday, *Nyango* Ebane met Ntube to find out what name she had chosen for the child. She said she had earlier gone to Muabag to ask Ntube's aunt *Nyango* Ahone, who because of age was not expected to make it to Atieg on

the day of naming. *Nyango* Ahone had said it was imperative to name the child after Ntube's father – *Sango* Ename-Nzume, father of the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. Ntube said inasmuch as that was logical; she would only use her father's praise name by which she herself was known. "The child would be called, Ntime-Awuo, Son-of-the-daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python".

"Who is Ntime-Awuo?" *Nyango* Ebane asked. "Did the child's father impose a name on you? In our tradition, a lover has no prerogatives over the naming of a child."

"Ntime-Awuo is my creation. It means, I have laughed at last. I have chosen the name on the basis of the realities around me."

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, you have hit the nail on the head. I totally agree with you. But our people say, if your squint eye makes you see wizards, burst it. Because of that I shall want us to burst our squint eye. Let's name the child, Mbuogmut Ntime-Awuo, Son-of-the-Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. I will tell you later why."

"As you say."

Nyango Ebane returned in very high spirits. On Friday she and other well-wishers accompanied Ntube to church for the baptism of the child. After mass, the Mbuogmut women led the child in a procession to Ntube's compound for the traditional naming ceremony.

Nyango Ebane had worked things out. She had told the chief celebrant *Nyango* Eloë, that the traditional naming ceremony would be a make-believe because of several unavoidable inconsistencies; for example, unlike the Bakossi tradition where a male child is named nine days after birth, the child was named in hospital shortly after he was born, the placenta was disposed of without ceremony, no one knows whether Ntube preserved the umbilical cord, the child is

baptized in church, no one knows whether Ntube's lover had prepared the basket-of-the-child as a husband would have done and so on and so forth. So, only the essential aspects of traditional naming would be done for the sake of validity.

Nyango Eloë took the basket-of-the-child which *Nyango* Ebane had presented to her and after a feigned scrutiny declared that all the items required for naming were there. But then, from habit, not intention to embarrass Ntube, she asked for the umbilical cord. *Nyango* Ebane's heart took a jolt as Ntube stood up and went to the room. Very soon, she brought her handbag, opened it and drew from it the dried umbilical cord wrapped in a piece of paper. On examining it and seeing that it was genuine, *Nyango* Ebane yelled and shrieked joyfully several times and then ululated and said nothing deceives the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. The women responded enthusiastically.

"The most important aspect of the ceremony is there – the umbilical cord would do two functions, its own and that of the placenta. So, it is not a make-believe ceremony," *Nyango* Eloë said, beckoned Etame and asked him to go and dig a hole behind the house. When the hole was dug, she and some elderly participants broke the dried umbilical cord into two, put half of it into the hole and planted a plantain sucker on it. The remaining half, they asked *Nyango* Ebane to have it ground into powder.

Nyango Eloë then went on to 'knot' the body of the child. After performing the knotting ritual, she held out the child and asked the attendant women what name they thought should be given to the child.

"Are you asking us? Is there any gainsaying that the child is *Sango* Esambe Ngoe, the late father of the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python? Is it not *Sango* Esambe Ngoe himself who has returned to us?" one of the women responded. Another

woman suggested that the child be named after his father? She said the village wanted to know their in-law. After two other jokes, *Nyango* Ebane grimaced at the woman in whom the name had been confided, and she cried out, "That is Mbuogmut Ntime-Awuo, Son-of-the-daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python." On hearing the name (a name that had been confided in her) the chief celebrant lifted up the child, called him by the name, ran with him to the road, placed him on the road, lifted him from there and dashed to place him on the eaves of the house, then she carried him to where the paramount chief and the dignitaries of the clan sat and announced the name; after which she gave the child to the chief to also proclaim the name to the clan. The paramount chief did as demanded, and when he was handing back the child, he offered him gifts. Other dignitaries shook the child's hand saying, "*A mue* Mbuogmut, welcome amongst us."

Nyango Eloë then laced the umbilical cord powder with *nyog* (black kennel palm oil) and using her index finger stirred it vigorously and rubbed it on the chest of Ntube and that of her son, Mbuogmut. Then she rubbed the mixture in her palms and hit Ntube's forehead and that of the child saying, "Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, from today, you shall be known as (*nnye* Mbuogmut) the mother of Mbuogmut; and you Mbuogmut, as the son of the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. Let this umbilical cord, now made into a solution smeared on your faces, once, what connected the two of you in pregnancy; still connect you as you live independent lives. Receive the blessings of the clan."

Saying that, and starting with the chiefs, *Nyango* Eloë rubbed the solution in her palms again and went round to shake hands with all patriarchs in attendance. As she approached *Sango* Elondo's chair, he got up and feigned going

out to urinate. *Nyango* Eloë waited till he returned. When he came he had no choice but to accept the handshake.

Immediately *Nyango* Eloë finished, the women ululated and started singing and dancing. They sang nine songs and danced round nine times. After the dancing, *Nyango* Ebane spoke briefly.

“People of Mbuogmut, if a stranger comes here now and sees us name an ‘adult child’ he would say we are mad. The truth is, childbirth in hospitals has destroyed our tradition of naming the girlchild eight days and the boychild nine days after birth. Today, once a child is born in hospital, they give them a name and even circumcise with no ritual considerations. Names and circumcisions with no ritual anointing are hollow and noncommittal. That was done in the case of this child. But we all know, a fruit that falls from a tree on a hill, falls twice – where it actually falls and where it is found. We know the history of Ntube – a history of childbirth unlike any other. It is therefore imperative for us to manifest good-will and concern for the child’s welfare by giving our traditional landmark on the name. We have chosen the name Mbuogmut because Mbuogmut means lone child, unique child. We all know what **ntime awuo** means. It means, I have laughed at last. This is perhaps the first time that, that phrase is used as a name in Bakossiland. As Ntube has laughed at last, so must we all laugh with her at last. Let us therefore start by rejoicing with her on this occasion. Whatever little thing she offers, let us take it in good faith. But before we go on, we should hear a word from the chief of Atieg and the paramount chief.”

The chief of Atieg stood up and addressed his people:

“*A hieeee,eeee yu!*” he yelled out.

“*Yüya,*” the assembly responded.

“*A hieeee, Atieg!*” he yelled again.

"Yiyya," the assembly responded again.

"My people, when cola nut is chewed for a long time, it becomes slimy. We have come here to celebrate the birth of Mbuogmut. If there is anybody here who does not accept *Mue* Mbuogmut, let him or her stand up and go. *A banyang* is that not what we have said?" he asked emphatically.

"That is what we have said," the assembly echoed.

"*Aha*, if there is anything for us, bring it," the chief concluded and handed the floor to the paramount chief.

"*Abiieee, yu!*" he yelled.

"Yiyya," the population responded.

"*Aieeee*, Mbuogmut!" the paramount chief yelled again.

"Yiyya! The assembly responded again.

"My subjects, the chief of Atieg has said it all. We welcome our son Mbuogmut in our midst and wish him well. To Ntube I would say, the English man says, he who laughs last, laughs best. *A* Ntube, as you are laughing last and laughing best, let your laugh be contagious. Let Mbuogmut laugh with you. My people, is that not what we have said?" the chief asked.

"That is what we have said," the people responded and with that, the chief sat down. *Nyango* Ebane then ordered the girls to serve food and drinks. Feasting started. While people ate and drank, some thought there were intermittent cries upvillage but they brushed them aside and concentrated on feasting.

Sango Elondo was ill at ease with the speeches of the chiefs. He thought his feigned urination when *Nyango* Eloee was about to shake hands (laden with umbilical-cord-solution) with him, had been taken for not appreciating Ntube's hard found good luck. That made him lose appetite and he sought ways of leaving the place. He soon interrupted the feasting with, "We may be feasting here when there is a

serious problem upvillage. I think there are cries around my compound.” When two other people confirmed that they had heard intermittent cries, he took leave and went. On his way, he heard female cries from *Sango* Nzum’Ebong’s compound and concluded that he had died. He went there and met his wife and two daughters crying over his body. He got the deceased man’s drum and announced his death to the community. The people heard the drum, suspected that *Sango* Nzum’Ebong had died but were so entrenched in the feasting that they simply brushed it aside. For several hours, the bereaved family saw nobody rush to express sorrow for the loss.

“A grain of corn is lost in a bag of rice,” the deceased man’s wife *Nyango* Nneh remarked.

“I am not surprised by the nonchalance of the people. I believe they have been hypnotized by the oath they have taken and abundance of food and drinks. I have never seen or heard that attendants at a naming ceremony are made to shake hands with the chief celebrant; but we were all made to shake hands (smeared with the umbilical cord solution) of the chief celebrant *Nyango* Eloë,” *Sango* Elondo revealed.

“*A ha!* That is it, Ntube’s unilateral destruction of the abodes of the doubles of patriarchs of the clan has not only killed my husband, it has also sabotaged his status in the clan – a patriarch dies, people hear the drum announcing death and are still enjoying themselves? Mbuogmut is pregnant, Mbuogmut will give birth.”

“It is poignant, downright unacceptable that even the people around this compound have not returned to see what is happening. Terrible!” *Sango* Elondo exclaimed.

The conversation between *Sango* Elondo and the deceased man’s wife enraged his daughters. “Mbuogmut will not catch mud fish and frog at the same time.” Nzelle, the eldest of

Sango Nzum'Ebong's seven daughters said – implying that the clan will not be made to enjoy two sumptuous feasts at the same time – Ntube's and their father's.

Chapter Thirty Four

S*ango* Nzum'Ebong's burial was dishearteningly muffled because most of the population was too drunk to attend. His immediate family of seven daughters and one son with the help of his maternal uncles buried him and announced to the few people at the graveside that his *ngandu* would be combined with *abieg*. *Abieg* is a ceremony that takes place three days after burial and *ngandu* is the most revered but flexible memorial ceremony. To combine the two required ritual announcement involving the slaughtering of a ram in the presence of the chief and his counsellors; who in turn, would send word to neighbouring villages, announcing the ceremony. That unconventional announcement was thus fraught with misgivings. Immediately news about it got to the chief, he summoned his counsellors and they confronted *Sango* Nzum'Ebong's family. A dispute ensued, dividing the village into two factions – those backing the family and those backing the chief. The chief decreed stopping both the *abieg* and the *ngandu* until all conventions were respected. The family was adamant and appealed to the paramount chief to convene an emergency clan council to discuss the dispute.

At the council, the family unveiled their grievances and blamed the clan's inability to handle the affair of the destruction of the abodes of clan spirits. In response, the paramount chief, in fear of long debate and flared tempers, formed a four man commission to study the case and make recommendations. The commission recommended that the *ngandu* be dropped but the *abieg* be held as it was customary. In relation to the destruction of the abodes of spirits, the commission recommended that Ntube be brought before the clan council within the shortest possible time – the time the

paramount chief in the council of chiefs would think convenient.

Three months after the council, the paramount chief invited the chiefs and counsellors to fix a date for the trial. He said Ntube's child had attained the age of probation and so his mother could stand trial and be sentenced. Most counsellors approved of that but *Sango* Elondo intervened.

"*Sango* paramount chief, chiefs and counsellors," he addressed them. "I believe the time we would have brought Ntube to stand trial has passed. Mere women have clobbered us. We have been outflanked and anybody advocating Ntube's trial now is not only wasting his time but is not also aware of what the women have done. What name did the women choose for Ntube's child? When *Nyango* Eloie proclaimed the name what did she do? And when she rubbed the umbilical cord solution in her hands, what did she do? Is there any Mbuogmut patriarch who did not shake hands with her? I tried to dodge from shaking her hand, but she cornered me. Know therefore, paramount chief, chiefs and counsellors that, that woman, that *Nyango* Eloie, consciously or unconsciously has unmasked us. That umbilical cord solution *Nyango* Eloie shook hands with us is worse than *kaanyame* (smallpox). Any collective of individual attempt to harm either that child or his mother would boomerang with devastating consequences. Furthermore, how can we, Mbuogmut put on trial the mother of Mbuogmut? Ntube has become our mother. Our forefathers said that the best way to avoid a scar is to avoid a wound. We have got the wound and so, the scar. Even the matriarchs of this clan are not left out. They have surrendered their matriarchic status to her. She has become also their mother. The other name of the child is Ntime Awuo. So, let's wait to laugh at last."

“O! *A Sango* Elondo,” the chief of Ngolo addresses him. “Our people say, the disease that would kill does not respond to treatment. That Ntube’s child’s naming ceremony had an enticing mystical force that pulled people out of their hiding places to Ntube’s compound. I remember, that day, my counsellor, *Sango* Enongene left Yoge and came home for no apparent reason and bumped into that ceremony. On arrival he rushed into shaking hands with *Nyango* Eloe.”

Sango Elondo’s revelations struck the paramount chief, chiefs and counsellors dumb. As the counsellors pondered over the matter, the chief declared it adjourned indefinitely.

Chapter Thirty Five

Three weeks after the adjournment, Ntube received a letter and a consignment of corrugated iron sheets from the PS to re-roof her house. In the letter, the PS said work on the bridge would start in November and would end by April. He emphasized that the work would be scrupulously supervised by the DO himself. To facilitate government effort, it was necessary for the natives to gather stones and sand. The people who brought the iron sheets had taken the road of the stepping-stones and so were not seen by the natives. Ntube entertained them and let them return by the same way.

Two days later, she went to Ekenzu to tell the paramount chief that she would want him to convene a clan council for her to talk to the clan. On hearing that, the chief's heart leaped up in great joy. "She has at last put the noose round her neck," the paramount chief said in his heart and summoned the village-crier to beat the big drum. News quickly spread. When *Nyango* Ebane got the news, she rushed to Ntube in rage.

"Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, I hear you have asked the paramount chief to convene the council of the clan. Can you predict its outcome? Have you not been hearing the conspiracy against you? And don't you think that your enemies would use that council to prosecute you? It would have been good if you had sought advice. I am not happy," *Nyango* Ebane said in anger.

"*A nyeh* Eban" Ntube addressed her. "I thank you very much for the concern but let me assure you, the people of Mbuogmut cannot conspire against me. I have done them no evil. I owe them no grudge. Those who are yelping about my

killing their people are just ignorant and when they will know the truth, they will be quiet. I have asked the paramount chief to call the clan council because of a letter I received concerning the development of the clan. The letter comes from Buea. On that day, I shall give it to them to read and take action. So, *mami* don't fear."

On the day of the council, the clan met at Ekenzu clan shrine. Most of the clan people were bobbling with incriminating accusations. They had chosen spokesmen – great orators to confront Ntube and pin her. They hinted the paramount chief of their intentions and pleaded with him to create opportunities for them to question and accuse her of wrongdoing. Although he accepted to collaborate with them, he insisted on order. He welcomed his people and introduced the mother of Mbuogmut.

"Chiefs, patriarchs and matriarchs of Mbuogmut, sons and daughters of our beloved clan, I welcome you to this shrine. Although I beat the big drum inviting you here today, I am just an instrument of information. The person who has invited you is the mother of Mbuogmut. So, I give the floor to her to tell us what has made her invite us. I shall be happy if nobody interrupts her when she is speaking. So, mother of Mbuogmut, the floor is yours," the paramount chief concluded.

Ntube moved to the centre of the shrine and addressed her people.

"Paramount chief, chiefs, patriarchs and matriarchs, sons and daughters of Mbuogmut, I am very delighted to have you here today. Unlike our previous encounters, this one is very different. Before I tell you what has prompted me to call you together, I want to remind you of the saying that, 'a fowl's trample does not kill the chick'. I want to believe that all the problems we have had have not killed me because you are the

fowl and I am the chick. I thank you and wish you to listen attentively to what is forth coming.”

The people held their breath as they saw Ntube move to the paramount chief to hand him a letter and ask him to appoint somebody to read it. The paramount chief got the letter and invited Ngwese to read it. He moved to the centre and read:

Office of the Private Secretary,
Governor's Office Buea,
West Cameroon,
12/10/1991

Dear Mary,

I am writing to tell you that per our conversation on the building of a bridge across the Atieg River, I succeeded to reactivate the dossier and have the Governor's approval. I then asked my friend the Senior Divisional Officer for Kupe Muanenguba to get competent contractors to carry out the work. He has just written to tell me that the contractors are ready and the work would start in November.

I would suggest that, for the work to be realized as soon as possible, your people should gather stones and if possible sand, so that the workers start work immediately they come. Your people should also be ready to lodge and protect them.

You had also insisted on bulldozing the road from the big field to Kodmin. That is a project on its own and I am fighting to have a contractor with good caterpillars to do the path clearing. Take note however that people with farms by the road will not be compensated for any destructions the caterpillars would cause.

I have sent a consignment of corrugated iron sheets to you for the rebuilding of the roof of your father's house. The carpenters will come with the bridge builders and I believe they will complete the work in a week's time.

I long to see the two of you. How is the baby?
Best regards,
Most lovingly
Nzemode Paul; PS

After reading the letter, Ngwese thought the community would applaud but not a single soul coughed. When he looked round, he found out that the chiefs and people of Mbuogmut were too stunned to speak – they cast a blank stare at him and Ntube. Not knowing what next to do, he decided to return the letter to the paramount chief.

“*A mue* Ngwese,” Ejolle retorted. “Don’t return the letter yet to the chief. Mbuogmut might not have heard what you have read. So read it again for Mbuogmut to hear.”

Ngwese read the letter again and that second reading sort of revived the people.

“Where do they say the letter comes from?” one elderly man asked.

“From Buea,” Ngwese responded.

“To whom is it addressed?” the man asked again.

“To Ntube,” Ngwese answered.

“How does it then concern the community? Why does Ntube call us to read her letter? And who wrote it?” the man asked.

“*A Sango*, you have not asked the right questions now. The bridge is a community thing and Ntube is right to draw the attention of the community to it when a letter from a high personality mentions it. All I know is that our people are

nonchalant because of earlier vain promises we have received from government about the bridge,” Ejolle retorted.

The paramount chief who had cast his eyes on the ground in deep meditation, raised his head, gazed at Ntube, their eyes met and they exhaled in a manner reminiscent of, ‘take the floor’. Ntube got the message and got the letter from Ngwese.

“People of Mbuogmut, *seh* Ejolle has said papa eh, eh, ... has asked wrong questions. I believe he has asked right questions. The letter is addressed to me. I have called the community to read it for several reasons – first, it concerns a community project. I would have kept the letter to myself and surprised the clan with the beginning of the project. But there is much more to it, much more than you can envisage now, that is why I have called the clan. And the much more is that, you have heard that all those whose farms are by the roadside, will not be compensated if caterpillars do any damage to their crops. So, the community should know about that. Secondly, you have heard that in order that the workers don’t come here and waste time, the community should gather stones and sand. The contractors will not depend on community work but they must be encouraged. The letter also states that the community should lodge and protect the workers. Then, the third and most important point is that, and here, I expect each of you to open your ears. If you see, the road from the big field to the hammock is strewn with huge *buma* trees. The road from the end of Atieg to Ekenzu and to Kodmin is equally laden with big trees, boulders and other landmarks. A caterpillar fells a tree no matter how huge it is, shatters a boulder no matter how huge it is and levels a hillock in a few minutes. The caterpillars that would be sent here would have a limited time to work and return. So they will not go in for negotiations when they start work. What do

I mean by this? By this I mean that all of you who have individual or collective spirits or animal doubles residing in any landmark (*buma* tree, boulder or hillock) along the road, should remove them before the caterpillars come. Anyone who has his spirit or animal double at the hammock should remove it before the workers come. I am saying this because of the earsplitting accusations levied against me that because I asked a boy to fell a hollow *buma* tree in which they say the spirits and animal doubles of patriots resided, they died and so, I killed them. Isn't it insulting and downright unacceptable to say that our patriots' animal doubles took refuge in a hollow, soft wood *buma* tree a child took only a few hours to fell? Furthermore, why do people transform into spirits and animal doubles? It is of course, to acquire more powers and wisdom. When we pour libation, we ask for the intervention of our fore-parents' spirits in matters we think are beyond human prowess. Spirits are therefore supposed to be wiser and more powerful than we are. How then can wise and powerful spirits see a child felling their habitat and not send a bee to sting him and kill him? They instead waited for him to fell the habitat and cause the death of their human forms? What people are saying is ridiculous. *Sango* Nzum'Ebong's daughters say it in my face that I killed their father and held back the population from attending his burial. Their father and any other elderly person who has died recently outlived my father by more than 30 years. What right had they to have a father that I hadn't? How many times did I accuse the clan for killing my father? Did anybody fell a *buma* tree to cause my father's death? Agreed, and it is sad that we have lost a good number of elders within this time. But we should know that those who are born at close intervals within a given time, what we call age mates, tend to die at close intervals at a later given time. What I am saying here is that, I owe nobody a

grudge and I take all the vile talk as ignorant talk. We must outlive ignorance. The next thing papa *eh, eh...* asked was who wrote the letter. The letter comes from the father of my son, Mbuogmut. He works in the governor's office. To prove to you that he means business, he has sent me corrugated iron sheets to re-roof my father's house. You can come and see them in my house."

"*A belobo nsoooooooooooo*," a woman ululated.

"*O nso nso o nso nso ooo*," the other women responded.

While the women ululated, the men sat with drooping ears completely abashed. Ewang-Eneme who had betrothed Ntube in childhood but lost her to Nsahbinla whispered to his friend Ejolle, "*A mue*, I think I was lucky in not marrying Ntube. The steam that comes out of her mouth is repulsive. It is now I know the meaning of the proverb that, a woman with a long nose, has a long mouth which squirts out long words. Ntube has once again clobbered the clan."

"She would not have been what she is, if she were married to you. You lost her to Nsahbinla because your Catholic Church upbringing made you too conventional with her. Ntube, a mature girl came to your house, entered your bedroom and went out again day in day out as if cold blood ran in your veins. She realized it and once she got in contact with hot blood, you lost her. Whatever she has become should be blamed on you," Ejolle retorted.

Ejolle's last word was drowned by a powerful "*Ahiee yul!*"

The attendants responded "*Yieeya.*"

"*A banyang*," Sango Elime addressed the people. "This antelope has bumped into an unarmed crowd. We are overwhelmed. Let our daughter Ntube not take offence that news that is greeted with great applause and dance in other quarters has not received such applause here. It is not because it is not worth our praises but because we are perplexed. Our

people say, he who makes a promise counts the days. We did not make any promise, so we did not count the days. I would suggest therefore that the paramount chief should end the meeting, and announce when we shall go for the gathering of stones. If I heard the mother of Mbuogmut well, the workers are due in 12 days. So, we have very little time."

"*A Sango Elim*,'" *Sango* Ntioge addressed *Sango* Elime. "Is it this clan, this Mbuogmut that you and Ntube are discussing like children playing *mbang*, (the shuttling of feet game) like that? Ntube has the guts to say we should displace the crocodile that has inhabited the hammock from time immemorial? Are we not living witnesses that that crocodile saved the life of Dione and her child two years ago? Dione was returning from the market and as she was crossing the hammock, her child fell from her back into the raging stream. She jumped into the stream and with the help of the crocodile rescued her child and swam to safety. Today Ntube says we displace the crocodile from there because she wants to build a bridge? Do you know why all other attempts to build a bridge in that place failed? Try it, and you will see."

"*A Sango Ntiog*,' we were all told that our fore-parents installed a crocodile at the hammock to protect people from falling from it and drowning. None of us has ever seen the crocodile. We were also told the crocodile went downstream for the same purpose whenever people began using the stepping stones in the dry season. Once we have a bridge, there would be no need for a crocodile anymore. So, we can move the crocodile upstream at the confluence of Chide and Chuong," *Sango* Esebe suggested.

"I think we better dismiss *Sango* Ntioge's threat. If I heard Ntube very well, she said there would be no negotiations when the work starts. People who are adamant and would not remove their spirits or animal doubles along the road would

have themselves to blame. Twelve days is a short time. All Mbuogmut should abandon any other thing and for 12 days gather stones, sand and gravel and pack them at the hammock,” *Sango* Elime said emphatically.

“*A banyang*, *Sango* Ntioge is not wrong. We need take a deeper look into what he has said. Instead of saying it in anger, I would want him to tell us what he thinks we should do. We all need a bridge to disenclave us. So, I give him the floor,” the paramount chief said.

“To build a bridge at the hammock requires that we displace the crocodile. To displace it we have to carry out an elaborate rite. We must incarnate and dance Muankum at the hammock all night long. Before we start dancing, we must put a large jug of palm wine and five cola nuts, and tie a ram by the side of the pool in which the crocodile is – the pool at the Ngomboku side of the stream. While we dance on this side of the hammock, we invoke the names of our founders and plead with them to convince the crocodile to move habitat. At dawn, we carry out libation with the palm wine, divine with the cola nuts and slaughter the ram; then we carry the items to the confluence where we want the crocodile to move, and pour them into the stream. Once we do that, the crocodile will move and we shall dance homeward without looking back.”

“Thank you *Sango* Ntioge. The problem we have now is how we shall get the things you have enumerated. How do we get them? Is there any person here who has a sizeable ram?” the paramount chief asked.

“My son Mbuogmut will give you a prize-winning ram and I believe the other things will not pose a problem,” Ntube said.

“*E made*,” (you have solved the problem) the assembly chorused in appreciation and clapped. The chief was highly

elated and thanked Ntube heartily. The assembly then fixed the day of the displacement of the crocodile – a day after the Ngomboku market.

Chapter Thirty Six

S*ango* Ntioge was chosen chief celebrant of the rite of displacing the crocodile. He scrupulously followed the procedure – he had a large gourd of palm wine, five cola nuts and a ram tied by the side of the pool. At dawn, some young men crossed the hammock, got the things and he started the libation prayer at the spot of ceremony:

Ooo wine eeee

Mbuogmut has assembled here *eeee*

That their ears have hummed *eeee*

That the world is changing *eeee*

That is why *eeee*

They want to use you *eeee*

As a medium of contact *eeee*

With their ancestors *eeee*

Tell them *eeee*

That what they (ancestors) see *eeee*

And hear *eeee*

Is what they (the living) also have seen *eeee*

And heard *eeee*

That cocks have overslept *eeee*

And so hens have crowed *eeee*

And they (the living) are expecting a new
dawn *eeee*

That new dawn *eeee*

Should receive their (ancestors') blessings
eeee

So that the up may be good *eeee*

And the down also *eeee*

In the new dawn *eeee*

If it's the cock that lays the egg *eeee*
 Let it incubate while the hen keeps watch
eeee
 As the right hand washes the left *eeee*
 So should the left wash the right *eeee*
 A single hand *eeee*
 Does not tie a bundle *eeee*
 That is why *eeee*
 They (the living) call upon their founders
eeee
 The five sons of Asome-Ngoe *eeee*
 Etan *ne* Sundem *eeee*
 Nyo *ne* Etug' *eeeeee*
 And Mbuogmut *mbogmboke* *eeee*
 To come to their assistance *eeee*
 That the wishes of the living *eeee*
 Should conform with those of the dead *eeee*
 And as they (the living) wish *eeee*
 That the crocodile *eeee*
 That has guarded them so selflessly *eeee*
 At the hammock *eeee*
 Should move habitat *eeee*
 To a new habitat *eeee*
 At the confluence *eeee*
 Where Chide meets Chuong *eeee*
 Let it go there *eeee*
 To protect their women *eeee*
 Who brave the current there to fish *eeee*
 Oooo wine *eeee*, O *sung o ngwe, o ngwe*
ngwe.

After the incantation, he filled a small gourd with the sacred palm wine, asked five people to divine with the sacred cola nuts, took five lobes of the nuts and waited for the sacred ram to be slaughtered. He collected its blood in a deep container and taking the things (palm wine, cola nuts and blood) broke into a Muankum run. The young men who chased after him could not catch up with him. By the time they got to the confluence, he had thrown the things into the stream and slumped onto the ground breathing very heavily with a whistling sound in his chest. The young men tried to get him up but he was too exhausted to stand on his own. So, they carried him to the place of ceremony where after a brief stop, he whispered that he should be carried to his house. Immediately he reached his house he died.

The death of *Sango* Ntioge was a devastating blow to the clan in general and Ntube in particular. It shook her faith. She wondered whether she was right in thinking that people never had animal doubles into which they transformed at certain times. Most people believed that the crocodile was *Sango* Ntioge's animal double and he died as a consequence of displacing it. Ntube and others held that the Muankum run was too demanding for an old man who could barely walk. Whatever reason there was, Mbuogmut mourned *Sango* Ntioge for three days. The chiefs were physically and psychologically shaken. Their enthusiasm for the bridge-building project waned but Ntube remained steadfast and convinced that the only way forward was to go on with it. The paramount chief took note of her undeterred spirit and declared her leader and spokesperson of the project.

Once she got that blessing, she dismantled the idea of collective collection of stones and sand that had been suggested by the paramount chief. She instead pitted villages against each other in the task. That generated the spirit of

competition and within eight days, the clan gathered more stones, sand and gravel than was required.

On the last day of carrying the sand and stones, the contractor came in with 4 tippers of cement, iron rods, wheelbarrows and pickaxes. He had thought that after unloading the things, the tippers would go buying sand, stones and gravel from the Mungo River depot – a good distance away. But when he saw the high grade sand, stones and gravel the clan had in place, he opted to buy them if the owners would sell. Buying the things on the spot would cost him by far less. Ntube realized at once that the PS had not told the contractor about his suggestion that the natives would facilitate his work by carrying the things before his arrival. To make sure she did not misconstrue the situation, she told him to go on with the project and they would discuss the price later. The contractor thought that was a trap for high price and insisted on buying the things cash before starting to use them. He offered five million francs for all the items. Ntube asked for twelve million on condition that he would draw his unskilled labour from the clan and neighbouring villages. The contractor accepted. That was still by far cheaper than buying the things from the Mungo River depot, and bringing labourers from Kumba. And with that, work started.

For the three months it took to build the bridge, Atieg became an El Do rado. People from other villages flocked there to seek employment, sell cooked food, beer and palm wine. A daily market sprang up attracting people from other clans of Asome-Ngoe and beyond, and that virtually undermined the Ngomboku market. With vehicles shuttling between Kumba and Atieg for cement, they brought in diverse merchandise. Atieg became a household name. A persistent rumour had it that its market would replace the

Ngomboku market and its envisaged road would be the main road to Bangem.

The rumour spread more when a caterpillar bulldozed the first part of the road from the big field to the hammock and shortened it by more than half. In fact, if one stood at the hammock, they saw the big field. The *buma* trees whose canopies had cast a dark ominous shadow over most of the surrounding area; making the soil permanently damp had been blown down and pushed far from the clearing. Centuries-old putrefying humus was scraped away and for the first time, hard sub-soil was exposed to the rays of the sun. Atieg was becoming a stone's throw from the main road and opening up. Its horizon was expanding as the thick inhibitive wild forest gave way to the furry of the caterpillar.

While the caterpillar was opening up Mbuogmut, the carpenters the PS sent were roofing Ntube's house with corrugated iron sheets – the first in the clan. News went round that a woman; the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python was roofing her house with corrugated iron sheets. That would have been an abomination if it were not that it was her father's house. Even a man could not build with corrugated iron without the expressed approval of the chief – after an elaborate sacrifice. After roofing her house, there were eighty pieces left over. She sent them to the chief and asked the carpenters to roof the chief's house too. They argued that they were sent to roof only one house and any other work would be paid for. Ntube accepted and paid them when they finished. She then met the contractor and told him that it was necessary to cement the two houses because they would be used in receiving the dignitaries who would come to inaugurate the bridge. The contractor accepted and did the work as part of the project.

After three months of hard work, the bridge was done. The caterpillar filled up the big field side of the bridge with stones and soil to flush it with the surface of the road, and then went round through the road of the stepping stones to link up from Atieg to the bridge. To prevent people from using the bridge before it settled properly, the caterpillar did not fill up the Atieg side. It continued its work to Ekenzu, Ngolo, Muabag, and finally Kodmin. As it smashed its way through the forests tearing down huge trees, the villages opened up in several ways. Distances between the villages were shortened, inter-village communication was enhanced and economic activities improved. When the caterpillar reached Kodmin, it returned to fill the Atieg side of the bridge. After that, the contractor told Ntube and her people that he would return to Kumba the next day with his equipment, and only return to Atieg when invited by the governor or his representative to hand over the bridge. Although it was ready for use, he advised that nobody should use it until it was inaugurated.

The chiefs and dignitaries then went and put a Muankum injunction with mystical repercussions at the bridge. They pinned two sticks in X-formation and stuck one red pepper to the sharpened tip of each stick at both sides of the bridge. Mbuogmut now lay in suspense as anxiety for the inauguration of the bridge bubbled. After two weeks wait, children invented ways of violating the Muankum restriction. They feigned blindness by blindfolding themselves and feeling their way across the bridge. They said since a blind person doesn't see, they could not be blamed for violating what they did not see. The more the administration wasted time in inaugurating the bridge, the more the people became impatient. The new road had shortened the distance from Atieg to the main road and people did not see any reason why

they had to take the winding road of the stepping stones. So, mostly the women feigned blindness and crossed the bridge.

Chapter Thirty Seven

While women and children cheated on the Muankum injunction, the chiefs were bugging their heads on how they would handle the inauguration. They had over tasked their subjects in carrying stones and sand. To impose a levy on them again could lead to rebellion. The paramount chief found it difficult to talk to Ntube who had so far sacrificed much toward the project. After some time, he called a meeting and tabled the inauguration issue.

“*A banyang*,” he addressed the attendants. “I have killed a frog but I’m afraid of its eyes. That is why I have called you to tell me what to do.”

“What is the frog you have killed and what are the eyes?” somebody asked.

“The bridge. The eyes are the preparation for the inauguration which I believe would be announced at short notice,” the chief responded.

The attendants sat quiet as the thought of new demands for sacrifices kept them ill at ease.

“*Sango* chief, would you break the leg of the woman who is an expert in love-making? Do you want to kill us? I believe we have sacrificed enough. Whether we entertain the people who will come to inaugurate the bridge or not, they will not carry the bridge away. So, leave us alone,” the same person supplicated.

“*Wawa!* Another person exclaimed. “I believe there is no sacrifice too great for us to appreciate what has happened to us. I saw children contesting the other day on who would be the first person to move blindfolded from Ekenzu to Ngolo. Can you imagine that? It is not only the bridge, but the road

also. Our sun set at 4 o'clock in those days but nowadays, the sky is open till 6.30 pm. Isn't that worth our moving naked, that is, – selling everything we have to entertain the world that would come to rejoice with us?"

"Thank you for your contribution *Sango*. We have demonstrated our worth in carrying out the project. Let us not now show weakness in what is insignificant. Leave the entertainment problem with me. I shall go naked to carry it out alone but I won't mind if people opted to assist me," Ntube said.

"I shall assist you with a goat," *Sango* Ewang-Ename of Atieg said.

"*A mue*, 'in whose village'! I shall assist with a pig," Ejolle chipped in.

"What do Atieg people want to show us? I shall assist with a pig," *Sango* Kolle of Ngolo opted.

Pledges went on and on. By the end of the day, the chiefs were confident they would have more than enough. They advised their subjects to start honouring the pledges by sending them to Atieg as soon as they got home. Ntube suggested that it would be better if each village collected and took care of its pledges. That would lighten the work of the chief of Atieg. That suggestion was adopted and the meeting ended.

On Tuesday, a letter came from Kumba announcing the date of the inauguration in two weeks. The chiefs and the population sent invitations to neighbouring clans. A few days to the date, Ntube and the chiefs moved from village to village to assess the donations and assign work to villages. In each village, she chose the fattest animal and asked the chief to send it to Atieg. "These chosen animals are what you call *meconde* (sitting or presence allowance for the SDO and his entourage). They usually don't eat much in an occasion

because they know they would be carrying home *meconde*,” she said.

Although the chiefs thought that all the cooking should be done in Atieg for better control, Ntube insisted that cooking should be done in each village so as to reduce stress and congestion. She said that would not only give the occasion a clan outlook, it would also make the ancestral spirits of each village have the feel of the event. They would see the blood of the animals slaughtered in their respective villages, and, so to speak, start feasting in their villages before they accompany the living to Atieg on the inauguration day. Furthermore, the aged who would be unable to get to Atieg would have the opportunity to share in the fun. On the D day, the villages would converge at Atieg, bringing in their blessings in procession.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Ntube's suggestion was highly appreciated by women of other villages who had abhorred going to cook at Atieg at the dictates of Atieg women. "No cordiality can replace a woman's freedom in her kitchen," one of the women remarked.

Nyango Ebane was also very happy that Atieg would be less congested. With fewer people to handle there would be ample opportunities to talk to the chief of Atieg. Two days before the inauguration, she went and saw him.

"Father-of-the-land," she addressed the chief after the customary greetings. "Now that the big day is just two nights away, I have the honour to come and 'steal' wisdom from your lips. Several things have been bugging my head ever since the date of the inauguration was announced. Before I get to the point, let me ask you, "What do the Bakossi people mean by, 'He who pays his debt crosses the road? A person can't peel off their nail? A wound does not go beyond the bone? You don't take a sick ram to your in-law's funeral? He who brings the boat to the shore is never forgotten?"

"*A Nyango Eban*," the chief responded. "Though your questions look simple, I'm afraid, knowing the calibre of woman you are, they may be tricky. So, I shall give the face value of each question and ask you to seek the wisdom of somebody else if my answers do not satisfy you. A debtor never feels free to move about because he dreads meeting his creditors. So to move freely, he must pay his debts. When we say we can't peel off the nail, (see how the nail is glued to the finger) we mean that we can't discard erring relatives no matter how bad they may be. When we say a wound does not go beyond the bone, we mean that an injury that cuts through

the bone is no longer considered a wound but an amputation. An in-law's funeral is an occasion for the display of the love and respect one had for the deceased. That is manifested in the type of animal one takes to the funeral. Only sumptuous animals are displayed at such occasions. In those days, boats traded with canoes in the sea; and canoe people brought the merchandise to the shore at exorbitant prices. But if an intermediary convinced the boat captain to get to the shore and trade directly it was said that such intermediaries are never forgotten."

"Father-of-the-land, thank you. You have answered correctly, nothing deceives you. Now, do you think Mbuogmut clan can cross the road in two days time? Don't you think that this your Mbuogmut clan will be dancing with a sore-footed ram in two days time? And if that happens, don't you think she who brought the Mbuogmut boat to the shore will not receive the admiration she deserves?" *Nyango Ebane* asked with an emotional hiccough.

The chief sat dumbfounded for a long time trying to decipher what *Nyango Ebane* meant. After some time, he told her that he did not understand what she meant. "It may be instead of you stealing wisdom from me, I shall steal from you," he said.

"*Sango* chief, I thank you for throwing the matter back to me. May I tell you therefore that I have come to confide in you that Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python is the epicentre of the great event that will take place in two days. We owe her and she owes us; so neither of us can move freely on that day. Ntube is our nail as we are her nail; but because of the intercrossing debt, she is as sore-footed as we are sore-footed and therefore neither of us is worthy of public display on that great day. Ntube has brought the Mbuogmut boat to the shore. For how long has Atieg

become the village of convergence in Bakossiland? See, Atieg is sparkling. All the houses have a facelift. The compounds have been cleared and swept awaiting the occasion; but Ntube and the Mbuogmut clan remain contaminated. That is why I have come to tell you that if we want to be worthy of public display, you should make good use of your prerogatives. We can't afford to go into that occasion in this muddled state" *Nyango* Ebane said.

"*A Nyango* Eban'," the chief responded, "what you are driving at is a complex issue and if we try to combine it with what we have in hand, we may be unable to handle the two issues. You want us to cleanse Ntube before we carry out the inauguration. Cleansing her requires elaborate preparations – preparations that can't be accomplished in two days; first, we have to convince Ntube herself to accept the cleansing; second, we have to invite prominent traditional doctors and chiefs from all the clans of Asome-Ngoe; third, we have to assemble all the required ritual items; and fourth, we have to prepare ourselves psychologically, morally and materially for the demands of the occasion. So, let's not mix urine and excrement. Let's go on with the inauguration and after that, we shall do the cleansing."

"*Sango* chief, I see all your worries accomplished already. On that day, we shall have all chiefs of Asome-Ngoe here, all traditional doctors, all material and ritual demands and above all, Ntube's willingness to be cleansed. We may not even ask her opinion – who is she? What we decide is what will happen. The bullet that kills the elephant is never a boulder but a pebble. Great things are achieved in simple occasions. And here I must tell you, when the paramount chief gives you the prerogative to pour libation in the occasion, don't assign it to somebody else. Do it yourself and impose your will on the people. You own this village. And if you don't know, you

are the gateway of the clan. Mbuogmut is unknowingly ceding paramount chieftaincy prerogatives to you. You should without overt confrontation acquire them. Start by working at the flanks – designing with the complicity of the paramount chief, what will be done in this occasion. Nobody will stop you from digressing from the main event to Ntube’s sanctification. And once you do that, you will see, the world will sing your praises. Don’t let this opportunity slip away. Use it – you have the last word now.”

“*A Nyango Eban’*,” the chief responded with a drawn voice. “You are pushing me into confrontation with the clan. But as you say, I shall think over it.”

“*Sango* chief, I am not pushing you into any confrontation with the clan. You need not think it over. The fact that the clan has accepted Ntube’s exploits is sure proof that time has cured her wound and only the scar remains to be blackened. Secondly, who does not see that time is sloughing Ntube? Whoever thought she would give birth? Has she given birth or not? All we have to do now is to streamline our benevolence with the inevitable and make her rejuvenation look as if it comes from our benediction. Spoken words declared her contaminated. Spoken words will pronounce her cleansed. And we, the Mbuogmut women think this is the best time our clan, in the presence of all Asome-Ngoe clans, should do so. I’ve not come here on my own, Mbuogmut women have sent me.” *Nyango Ebane* said, genuflected and left.

Chapter Thirty Nine

N*nyango* Ebane's concerns disorientated the chief and left him stuttering – trying to remember what he was doing before she came in. He slumped into his wooden sofa and almost dozed off when he recollected that *Nyango* Ebane came in just when he was about arranging his parlour for the last preparatory meeting with the paramount chief and chiefs of other villages. He sighed and hurriedly arranged the chairs. Presently the chiefs came and the meeting started.

The chiefs examined the tasks ahead and assigned roles to villages and individuals. The chief of Atieg was assigned the role of pouring libation; but to give the occasion a clan hue, he suggested that other Mbuogmut village chiefs assist in the libation. “A river without tributaries winds,” he said and the other chiefs accepted to assist him.

On the day of inauguration, the population crossed the bridge and lined up on both sides of the road from the big field to the bridge. The organizers then tied a ribbon across the bridge and waited for the arrival of Senior District Officer (SDO), who represented the Governor. When he came, he drove slowly between the two rows waving at the ecstatic crowd. At the bridge, he stopped, shook hands with village dignitaries and after that cut the ribbon and drove across the bridge in thunderous applause. The rapturous population sang and danced as they filed behind the SDO's car. When the driver got to the road junction of the stepping stones and saw Ntube's compound and house highly decorated, he wheeled towards it. Ntube rushed to tell him that the procession should move to the chief's house mid-village. The chief took a long breath of relief as the procession turned and

moved to his compound. Once in the compound, the dignitaries and the invitees were led to their seats for the second stage of the occasion.

The chief of Atieg then sent three young men to the village grove to bring the calabash of palm wine and five cola nuts that had been left there over night. When they brought the things, the paramount chief and two elders examined the wine and shook their heads approvingly. They found that the calabash that was full to the brim when it was left in the grove was partially full. That was an indication that the clan's ancestral spirits had drunk some of the wine and blessed what remained for libation. They also examined the cola nuts and found that the lobes were not as firmly glued as they were when they were left there. That too was an indication that the spirits had split and eaten the cola nuts and left them virtually loose for easy splitting by their children. The chiefs of other Mbuogmut villages were then invited to assist in the libation. They sat on low stools in a horseshoe formation and stretched hands at the calabash and cola nuts that were put in the middle. Then the chief of Atieg moved in and sat astride on a low stool and pulled the calabash of wine between his legs. He rolled his hands on the jug and asked each of the other chiefs to do the same. Then he took the 'leaf-cork' of the calabash, raised it and the attendants squirted their blessings on it. He then started shuttling the leaf-cork up and down the mouth of the calabash chanting:

O wine *eeee*

The up and the down of Bakossiland *eeee*

Have met here today *eeee*

To give honour to a new dawn *eeee*

For the Mbuogmut clan *eeee*

That is why *eeee*

We are using you and cola nuts *eeee*

As agents of contact *eeee*
Between the living and the dead *eeee*
So that men and their wives *eeee*
Should have only one word *eeee*
Same with brothers and sisters *eeee*
Same with natives and strangers *eeee*
That what the living say *eeee*
Should reflect what the dead think *eeee*

O wine *eeee*
As our ancestors have drunk you *eeee*
So shall we drink you *eeee*
So that whatever satisfaction they got *eeee*
We should get *eeee*
We *eeee*, and our strangers *eeee*
Who have come to grace this occasion *eeee*
Let *Sango* SDO and his entourage *eeee*
Have stories to tell *eeee*
That they came to Mbuogmut with hunger
eeee
But returned with bellyfuls *eeee*
So that when next time they are sent *eeee*
For another inauguration *eeee*
They should not drag their feet *eeee*

O wine *eeee*
This is the dawn of great things to come to
this clan *eeee*
So, we intercede with the five sons of
Asume-Ngoe *eeee*
Etan' *ne* Sundem, Nyo *ne* Etug'; Mbuogmut *mbugmbuke* *eeee*
To come and join hands with our village
ancestors *eeee*

Sango Nzike Ebong of Ekenzu *eeee*,
Sango Nzume Ndele of Muabag *eeee*,
Sango Ekwele of Ngolo *eeee*,
Sango Ebonlo of Kodmin *eeee*
Sango Ename of Atieg *eeee*
Let them come as one man *eeee*
To intercede for us *eeee*
So that what belongs to us *eeee*
Should not wait again for years *eeee*
As this bridge waited *eeee*
Let them use their prerogatives *eeee*
To bring development projects to us *eeee*

O wine *eeee*
As it is said *eeee*
That a river roars *eeee*
Only when it has boulders *eeee*
We supplicate for human boulders *eeee*
Who would stir up our cases in Buea *eeee*
In this regard *eeee*
Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream Python
eeee
Who has brought us this blessing *eeee*
Stands out distinctively *eeee*
So *eeee*, we entrust her *eeee*
Into the hands of our ancestors *eeee*
For protection *eeee*
That where she sleeps *eeee*
No rat, cockroach or insect of ill-omen *eeee*
Should pass nearby *eeee*
That whoever looks at her with evil eyes
eeee
Should be blinded by her vivacity *eeee*

Whoever says evil things against her *eeee*
Should have a gruesome bite of their tongue

eeee

Today *eeee eeee* we exonerate her *eeee*
From whatever misunderstanding she had

eeee

With this clan *eeee*

Let her front be clear *eeee*

And her back too *eeee*

(“Mbuogmut, is that not what we have said?”
the enchanter asked)

(“That is what we have said,” the assembly
responded in unison)

O wine *eeee*

Let a hawk not know where a fowl incubates

eeee

So that the fowl should hatch seven chickens

eeee

Three cocks and four hens *eeee*

That two cocks be meant for food *eeee*

And one to procreate with the hens *eeee*

Let the wombs of the women of Asome-Ngoe

eeee

Be open and flood the land with children *eeee*

Let the children, male and female *eeee*

Go to school and bring knowledge *eeee*

To develop the land *eeee*

Anybody who does not wish us well *eeee*

Should be stricken with palsy *eeee*

If evil people throw us on coarse grass *eeee*

Let us land on soft grass *eeee*

O mim eeee, o sung o ngwe, o ngwe ngwe

A hieeee yul! (The enchanter exclaimed and
Threw down the leaf-cock)
Yiyya (The other chiefs and crowd responded)

The chiefs stood up from their low stools and excitedly praised the enchanter for a job well done. They clapped hands overhead and recited each other's praises. After that, the paramount chief got the five cola nuts, gave one to each chief and asked them to divine with them. He took the lead himself. He broke a cola nut and held the five lobes in both hands and stood with a telling frown to hush the crowd to silence. Once he obtained it; he raised his hands methodically and asked the attendees to squirt their blessings on the cola nuts. "Shiiiiiiiiiii" the blessing went.

"Cola nut, you have heard the words of the enchanter. They reflect the collective thinking of the living. If our thinking is in conformity with that of our ancestors, tell us, go down that we may eat you," he said and threw down the lobes. Four lobes faced downward and one faced upward. While the paramount chief strained his eyes examining the positions of the lobes, a young man with sharper eyes exclaimed, "*A saa!*" (It has confirmed) and pointed at the odd lobe. The paramount chief yelled with exuberance "*A hieeee yul!*" the attendees responded "*Yiia.*" He took the odd lobe and put it aside. The next chief took his turn, threw the cola nut and got the same result, then the next, and the next till the last of them. The paramount chief then assembled all the odd lobes and held them firmly in his right hand. "Odd lobes," he addressed them. "You have filled us with pride and honour for not disgracing us. Now we need a fore-lobe among you, a leader. Go down and give us one." He shuttled the odd lobes in his hands and threw them down to get the lobe of consensus. Four loves faced upward and one faced

downward – that was the lobe of consensus. That done, he asked for five small gourds (*pid*). The chief of Atieg filled the first *pid*, put it in the first position and placed the lobe of consensus by it. Then he filled the others and lined them up – placing an odd lobe by each.

The paramount chief then conferred with his chiefs and each gave him the name of the person they wanted to receive the blessings of the occasion. Ntube-me-Emad-Dione, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, the paramount chief called the first name. “Wooooooooooo!” an ecstatic population greeted with thunderous applause. Ntube stepped forth and the paramount chief placed her at the first position – the position of the first *pid* and lobe of consensus. The population held their breath at that marked change in tradition and listened with anxiety as the chief called out the names of the other recommended recipients of the sanctified wine – Ekwel Mbue of Ekenzu, Ndobe of Muabag, Njume of Ngolo and Diele of Kodmin. The order of reception was reversed with the last being the first.

“Diele,” the chief of Kodmin who was asked to start the blessing, addressed her. “You and your husband are five years in marriage without an issue. Before you went to marriage everybody saw your body dangling with children. That is, everybody thought a single shot was sufficient to home in a child. But your state is not only an embarrassment to you and your husband; it is to us all. Today, we the Mbuogmut people want to pull you out of anything that impedes your getting pregnant; so in the presence of all the ancestors of Asome-Ngoe, we here endow you with what it takes to become a mother,” he said, took the *pid* and lobe of cola nut from the ground and raised them twice for the attendees to bless them. “Shiiiiiiiiiii,” the blessing went. “Diele,” he continued. “If this clan still has people of substance, if our ancestors still listen

to us, we give you two months to change colour. Bear us a child. Etan ne Sundem, Nyo ne Etug, Mbuogmut *mbogmoke* isn't that what we have said?" he asked. "That is what we have said," the crowd responded. The chief then took the things, nibbled the cola nut, chewed it, sipped a bit of wine and spewed the paste onto Diele's chest and stomach. Then he stretched his hands to give her the remaining cola nut and wine. Then he asked her to nibble the cola nut and drink a bit of the wine and give the rest to her husband. In taking the things, Diele rolled her hands from the chief's head to his hands and got the things. She nibbled the cola nut, sipped the wine and handed the rest to her husband. He took the things, ate the entire cola nut and emptied the *pid* and returned the empty *pid* to Diele who in turn returned it to the chief. The chief massaged her with the *pid*, then raised her hand with the *pid* for the final blessing. An ecstatic audience ululated. The next candidate was Njume. After his chief had spoken why Njume needed to be blessed, he asked him to take the *pid* and cola nut from the ground and raise them three times for the population to bless him. Ndobe and Ekwel Mbwe received the same treatment. Each of them took the lobe and *pid* from the ground and asked the assembly to bless them. At last, it was Ntubes turn. The attendees held the breath.

The paramount chief himself took to the podium to give Ntube the wine and cola nut. He moved round the recipients three times in a very pensive and emotional manner before addressing her. "Ntube-me-Emad-Dione, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, Mother-of-Mbuogmut, Disenclaver of the enclaved, in the presence of the clans of Asome-Ngoe and our august guests, your chief, the chief of Atieg, the pivotal enchanter, has made unequivocal pronouncements which I simply want to complement with a few words. When a fruit is ripe it falls. Today we hoist you up as our symbol of

disenclavement. Today, we imbue you with all it takes for a cock to crow. If it is the comb that makes a cock crow, we offer you one today. We adorn you with the necklace of the fangs of tigers. We offer you two black *elob* of *Ahon*. We offer you the insignia of Muankum. As you stand facing the east, let your days be a series of joyous dawns. The person who is not happy with what we have said, can find his way to Ndibeyok (the place of executions). People of Asome-Ngoe isn't that what we have said?" the paramount chief asked. "That is what we have said," the population responded.

"Daughter-of-the-Up-Stream-Python, what is in my stomach can flood rivers. But because of this occasion I have to cut things short. So, take the *pid* and cola nut and raise them three times for your people to bless you. Eat the entire cola nut and drink all of the palm wine. If you are unable to finish the palm wine, pour it on the ground for your ancestors to drink."

Ntube bent down, got the things, ate the entire cola nut and in one drawn swig she emptied the *pid* to the admiration of some people and disapproval of others. Thus the applause that followed was laced with hecklings. That did not bother Ntube. She put down the *pid* in grand style and stepped backward for the paramount chief to take over.

He took over and announced the end of the libation. The women ululated and danced round Ntube and led her to her sit. The chief then asked for the welcome address to be read. In it the clan expressed their thanks to the government for building the bridge and tabled a catalogue of other problems they wanted the government to assist them in. In his response, the SDO praised the people and said he would carry their worries to the authorities. After the speeches, the Mbuogmut clan offered the invitees a memorable banquet. At the end of it the chief gave the SDO and his entourage

assorted livestock and sent a cow to the Governor. The august guests then left.

Ntube had played down the presence of her boyfriend the PS during the inauguration for fear of undermining the Governor's representative, the SDO. After the external guests had left, she introduced him to her people as the father of her child and the man behind the building of the bridge. The natives went wild with joy and carried him shoulder high. The women ululated and offered him a totemic loincloth. The men made him an honorary citizen. In response, the PS promised to carry out more development projects in the area and invited the people for more feasting in Ntube's house. There they danced, sang, ate and drank till the next day. For several days people talked of nothing else but the inauguration

Chapter Forty

Two weeks after the inauguration, Ntube sent word to the paramount chief that it would be necessary for the clan to make an evaluation of the inauguration. The chief promptly summoned a clan council at Atieg. Some of his counsellors opposed the venue on grounds that Ekenzu was the Head Quarter of the clan and the meeting had to take place there. The paramount chief argued that it would be easier recalling aspects of the event where it took place than where it did not. On the appointed day, the chiefs and their counsellors went to Atieg and after evaluating the inauguration and congratulating themselves for a job well done; Ntube revealed that the sand and stones they had carried for the project were in fact sold to the contractor for eight million francs. She said she did not tell anybody about it because she did not want them to divert attention from the project to the money. Secondly, she did not want people to know that she had so much money in her house. "Now that you are all here, here is the money," she said and placed it on the table.

Some people exhaled loudly; others palpitated and others simply sat dumbfounded, baffled by the sight of so much money. They batted eyes at it, their Adam's apples shuttling as they envisaged a thousand uses of it if it belonged to them. "Here is the money. I want you to decide what we should do with it," Ntube said to pull the people out of the deep reverie.

"What else do people do with collective money? They share it?" somebody responded.

"I support. Let's share it," a second person said.

I suggest we keep the money in the Mission. The Rev. Father has a good safe. We are too stunned now to make any

tangible suggestions. When we are more composed we shall know what to do with the money,” *Sango* Elime said.

“What are you saying – are we waiting for the owner of the money to come and make a better decision for us? People say, we share the money; and you say we keep it? You want to throw a fish already in the basket into the stream and start fishing again?” *Sango* Nkede asked.

“*A mue* Nked”, “*Sango* Elime addressed *Sango* Nkede, “Let us not behave as if we have never seen money...”

“What are you saying? Have you ever seen a million francs? If you have, I have never,” *Sango* Nkede cut in.

“Let us put it to vote – those who want the money to be kept and those who want it shared,” *Sango* Ejole suggested.

After some more bickering, the matter was put to vote. Most of the people voted for the sharing of the money.

“Now that we want to share the money, we should know which village provided what and who did what during the carrying of the stones and sand. We should try to be as fair as possible so that villages that sacrificed more and individuals who worked more should not be cheated. For example, I know we shall want to share the money according to villages. If so, the Atieg village from which we got the sand and stones cannot be given the same share as other villages. The youths who did more of the carrying cannot be given the same shares as soloists of work-songs. So let’s draw up modalities for sharing the money,” Etoe from Atieg suggested.

“What are you saying? Do you think Atieg sacrificed more? Atieg people did not have to cover long distances stubbing their toes as we did. They did not have to eat stale overnight foods. That alone more than compensates whatever Atieg offered,” a boy from Ngolo interrupted.

“Ebag, keep quiet. Atieg offered more than your narrow mind can make you appreciate. Where have you ever heard

that the owner of a fruit tree shares equally with the person who climbs the tree to harvest the fruits? Whether you like it or not, Atieg is the hub of this project – its conception and execution were the handiwork of an Atieg daughter,” Etoe explained.

“Is that where you stake your claims? No doubt you and the chiefs are unmasking our tradition by priming Ntube. One day she will explode and you will be unable to control her. I believe you, you Atieg people are concealing fangs like a viper,” Ebage said.

The paramount chief overheard Ebage and fearing that such utterances could ignite inter-village quarrels, scolded the belligerents and asked the assembly whether they had dreamt of having money in the meeting. “Whether we share the money or keep it, it is our money. Why then should we be splitting knobby wood about it?” he asked.

“Though the majority has voted to share the money, I believe that the best thing to do is keep it for future use. We have development projects that require money. We need pipe-borne water, we need at least two schools – one at Kodmin and the other at Muabag the most hinterland villages, we need scholarships for poor children in Sasse, we need a coffee mill, we need very many other things we can’t wait for the government to do for us. And even if we were to wait, the government reacts faster if people show proof that they are in terrible need of a project by contributing their quota; So, I suggest that the paramount chief should keep the money. I want to travel. When I return, we shall sit down and think of a project to tackle,” Ntube advised.

The paramount chief supported the idea and decreed that the money be kept in the Rev. Father’s safe. Some people took offence at the decree and suggested that at least part of the money be shared. The paramount chief sighed, took the

money from the table and handed it to Ntube. The people protested by walking out. Ntube, the paramount chief and a few others were unruffled. While the disgruntled scurried homeward Ntube carried the money to the Mission and kept it in the safe.

While Ntube was saving the money in the Mission, the returnees of the hinterland were climbing the last hill to Ekenzu. One elderly person in half breath remarked, "In those days it was the Atieg people who climbed these hills to attend meetings at Ekenzu. But ever since Atieg begot a mermaid – the male-lady, things have changed, It is the Ekenzu people and their chief who make pilgrimages to Atieg nowadays to be humiliated by the dictates of *Sango* Ntube. Although the paramount chief is behind, I shall wait for him in his house to tell him that he should cede power to his son or assume his prerogatives and make Ekenzu the prime village of this clan and not Atieg. If he wouldn't convene meetings here in Ekenzu, he will never see me again. I shall never attend meetings again at Atieg,"

"O! *A mue*," another elderly man exclaimed. "You have drained pus from the abscess. I thought I was the only one with that opinion. Can you imagine our predicament! We work and a little girl sells the things without our approval and when finally she tells us she sold them at the price she told us, she refuses to give us even money to buy tobacco? Look at my pipe, it is empty, empty and, and all my hopes are dashed."

"It is not one person who will wait for the chief. All of us should wait for him and tell him without mincing words that we can no longer tolerate their hyper-dealings with Ntube. Ntube hypnotizes them and tele-guides their actions. But for the fact that the SDO was there, I would have disrupted the giving of the sacred palm wine and cola nut at the

inauguration. Where in Bakossiland have we heard that a woman is asked to take the sacred items from the ground herself and raise them for the community to bless her? There is some astral overtone in Ntube's dealings with us. Remember what *Sango* Ntioge said when he was pouring libation to make the crocodile change habitat at the hammock; he enchanted, "...That the cocks have overslept *eeee* And so the hens have crowed *eeee*So even if it is the cock that lays the egg *eeee* Let it incubate well while the hen keeps watch *eeee*." Today, our paramount chief and his lieutenant the chief of Atieg fall short of giving Ntube balls! I don't think I shall like to be partisan in unmasking our time honoured tradition and culture," *Sango* Elondo said breathlessly.

By the time he finished talking, they got to the paramount chief's compound. Unfortunately, none of his wives was at home and so they found it inappropriate to wait for him. They however decided to convene a clan meeting at the Ekenzu grove in two weeks.

Chapter Forty One

Three days after Ntube had saved the money with the Rev, Father, she went to Manyemen to see her Doctor. The Doctor examined her and said she had some nodules in her left breast which had to be monitored scrupulously. “Unless you have something very pressing at home, I would prefer that you stay within reach for very close follow up,” the Doctor advised.

With that, Ntube stayed at Manyemen for three months. While there, the Mbuogmut clan was smouldering in revolt. The people who were aggrieved by what they considered untoward breaches of Bakossi culture and traditions by the paramount chief and the chief of Atieg connived to impeach them. They went around telling people that Ntube used astral powers to hypnotize the chiefs and the population and that was why the clan had no powers over her. They cited the numerous times she had been brought to the clan council for very serious crimes and was left unpunished for no apparent reasons..

The families of *Sango* Ntioge who died at the ceremony of displacing the crocodile and that of *Sango* Nzum'Ebong who died on the day Ntube named her child reacted promptly to the campaign. They migrated across the bridge and built just before the big field. Within a week, seven families in Atieg followed them. Before a month the new settlement had outgrown Ekenzu and Atieg put together in size and population. The hinterland villages were getting depopulated at an alarming rate as more and more people left. The new settlement soon extended to the main road. This of course posed the problem of belonging – did the immigrants belong

to the Mbuogmut clan or to the Muetan clan to which they had migrated?

The paramount chief and the chief of Atieg found themselves in a precarious situation. The new settlement was virtually slipping out of their grip. Something had to be done. They held a secret meeting with their loyal subjects and decided to attack the new settlement at night and burn the houses and force back the immigrants. On second thought they agreed to sabotage the settlement by inciting the Muetan people against them. They tried but their strategy failed because the Ngomboku people (Muetan clan) were happy to see their village expand. So the paramount chief and the chief of Atieg decided to hold a clan meeting at Atieg.

The meeting was heavily attended by the defiant and determined immigrants. When everybody was seated, the paramount chief stood up and intoned a song in which he said, 'In a fight between brothers daggers are not drawn'. He said he considered the pivotal point of the meeting as a fight between brothers. In other words, he expected his people to discuss the issues without bitterness. Then he went on to say that it was heart-rending to see his people move village at the time there was a bridge over the river that had enclaved their clan for centuries. "What was the purpose of the bridge? To which clan do you, the immigrants now belong? Before migrating, did you not recall the proverb that 'he who sleeps on a borrowed mat is soon on the ground?' What wound has gone beyond the bone?" he asked with tensed nerves.

"*Sango* paramount chief," *Sango* Elondo addressed the chief. "Your people are bubbling with rage."

"Let me cut you short. Which people are you calling his people? We have crossed the river. We are no longer his people," the son of the late *Sango* Ntioge interrupted.

“Yes, *A mue*,” *Sango* Elondo continued. “A marriage with children does not end in total divorce. If you see a lock of wool on the ground, know it came from a sheep. You don’t peel the nail. So, let’s accept at least for now to be his people. *Sango* chief, as I was saying, your people are in rage because you no longer represent their collective interests. Something mysterious has eroded the powers conferred on you by our ancestors. If we had our way, we would have convened a meeting at the clan grove at Ekenzu before the migrations started. But whenever we tried to do so, we found an impediment, we hadn’t the prerogatives. So we decided to found our settlement where we can practice our culture and traditions as our ancestors designed them. You and the chief of Atieg have defiled our time tested culture and traditions. You have been impotent in handling culture-threatening issues. Where one would have expected you to pass a decree in upholding our culture and traditions, you have faltered. In several occasions we have brought Ntube before the clan council for very serious offences – destruction of the Brook-of-the-Serpent, refusal to be cleansed, failure to carry out the rite for the disposal of the ritual items she made us abandon in the grove, destruction of the grove behind her father’s compound, destruction of the abodes of the spirits of the clan and so on and so forth; but you have tended to listen to the voices of women than to the voices of the patriarchs of this clan.”

“*A Sango* Elondo, you have forgotten the most recent one – the stone that broke the calabash,” *Sango* Ekabe intervened. “You remember during the inauguration when Ntube was given the sacred palm wine and cola nut, they unilaterally absolved her of her crimes and cleansed her. That was not all, they asked her to take the sacred things and raise them for the assembly to bless her. That was a gross violation of our

culture. A man takes the things, raises them and asks the assembly to bless them and then he hands them to the woman. But Ntube's case was the reverse. In that act, the paramount chief and the chief of Atieg gave Ntube balls. I am not therefore surprised that people refer to Ntube nowadays as *Sango* Ntube and not *Nyango* Ntube."

"People of Mbuogmut," the paramount chief addressed the people. "Rain that falls slantingly wets the foundation of a building. I have heard the accusations but they slant. They slant because you exonerate yourselves from any wrongdoing. It is sad that you lay all the blames on me and the chief of Atieg. Don't forget that the soloist and the chorister sing the same song. When the chief of Atieg was enchanting and made declarations on your behalf didn't he ask your approval? I remember very well that he asked, 'Isn't that what we have said?' And you responded, 'That is what we have said.' How can you therefore be exonerated from what you accuse him of? How else did you expect him to show that it was a collective e, e, e? So, I would tell you in your faces that we did not give Ntube any balls. If she has any balls then she seized them. She seized the balls. She seized the balls in the presence of all of us. Ntube seized the balls. She seized the balls in our presence. If she did not seize the balls in our presence, let us wait for her to return from her journey. I believe she will soon return. So, I adjourn the meeting till she returns."

Chapter Forty Two

Ntube returned to Atieg six days before the Ngomboku market day. It was very late in the evening and most people had gone to sleep. When the driver who brought her was driving through the new settlement and calling it Newtown, she did not take much interest in it. She thought a new wave of immigrants from Bamenda had been settled there by Ngomboku people.

In the morning she sent her house-keeper Etame to tell *Nyango* Ebane that she had returned. *Nyango* Ebane dashed out to welcome The-Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. When she got close to Ntube's house, she slowed down and started staggering and groaning towards the house as if she were in great pains. Ntube stared at her with mixed feelings. "Why would anybody in such pains worry themselves to come and welcome a returnee?" she asked herself in her heart.

As if *Nyango* Ebane had eavesdropped on her internal conversation she responded, "Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python *eeee*, I am not sick *eeee*, though I am groaning *eeee*, I am groaning *eeee* because of the ingratitude of our people *eeee* All the work you have done in this clan *eeee* has been wasted *eeee*. Mbuogmut is finished – destroyed, devastated. Nobody is left."

"What has happened? Is there a plague? Have all the people died in my absence?" Ntube asked.

"Nobody has died but the people have migrated to the big field, across the bridge. You saw the new settlement *noo*? If you go up-village now you will be surprised at what has happened. It is bare. It is a ghost town. It is hair-raising – dreadful. Only a few of us remain."

“What about the chief? Has he migrated also?”

“He has not migrated but he is in very bad state. Not only him, all the chiefs of our clan. There is no village which has not lost half its population to the new settlement they call Newtown.”

“Why have they migrated?”

“They accuse the paramount chief and the chief of this village of gross violation of their culture.”

“And that is why they migrated?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for the information. Immediately I feed the child, I shall go and see the chief.”

“How are you? I was afraid you were not well. You kept so long. Welcome,” *Nyango* Ebane changed the topic.

“I am OK now but I was not well. The doctor kept me under observation for a long time. Three days ago she told me all was well and I could return. I left Mayemen late because there were no vehicles; so I got here at night. I saw the new settlement quite well but thought a new wave of immigrants from Bamenda and Bana had come and settled there. Now you say it is our people. What happened with them? Where they are is a narrow strip of land between the river and the main road. They can’t cultivate any farms of economic importance there. ”

“Feed the child and go and see the chief. I shall return to prepare some food for us. What will you like to eat?” *Nyango* Ebane asked.

“If *esubag ne nzabe ngen* will not be too demanding, I prefer it.”

“Even if it were demanding, I will prepare it. Don’t keep too long with the chief. I’ll like you to eat it hot,” *Nyango* Ebane said and left.

Ntube hurriedly fed the child and went and saw the chief. He received her cordially and in the conversation that followed, they agreed to send a child to Ekenzu to inform the paramount chief of her return.

“If she has returned, then the best thing is to take the conspirators unawares. Ngomboku market day is five days from today. So, tell the chief of Atieg to prepare to host a clan council in two days time. He should inform the immigrants,” the paramount chief told the emissary.

The emissary returned and delivered the message. The chief of Atieg sent the town crier to Newtown to announce the meeting. Although it was at short notice, the grove was full. The immigrants had convened preparatory meetings overnight and made strategies in the way they would talk to the paramount chief, the chief of Atieg and Ntube. They had resolved to break away from the clan and appoint their own chief. The paramount chief had on his part predicted that move and so had come earlier on the day of the meeting to caution Ntube and the chief of Atieg against confrontation. “When I open the meeting, I shall allow them drain their entrails. I know they will be impudent and hostile. I shall advise that even if they insult us directly or indirectly, we should be calm. We should use their pincers to ‘kill’ them as one uses the pincers of a crab to kill it,” the paramount chief had advised.

On hearing that, Ntube advised the chief of Atieg to make the attendees sit in a circle. Sitting in a circle controls heroes in the crowd – cowards who make noise at the background. It ensures that every speaker gets equal exposure and so knocks off timid ones.

After everybody had sat, the paramount chief got up and addressed the people in all civility. “My people, our forefathers said a river that flows without tributaries winds. I

thought I had you as my tributaries but when I found myself winding I convened a meeting. Unfortunately, because of the absence of one of us, we adjourned the meeting. Today, the person is present and I would like us to express our differences in a cordial and frank manner. The word chief implies subjects and vice versa. A chief that loses his subjects cannot sit on his laurels. The other day, you accused the chief of Atieg and me of violating Bakossi culture and traditions and because of that you decided to migrate to Ngomboku. I cannot recall the catalogue of accusations. So, let's put our heads together and discover which stone cracks our calabash. The floor is open."

"*Sango* chief," *Sango* Elondo addressed the paramount chief. "Our grievances against you are not difficult to recall since they are interwoven with Ntube's culture-and-tradition-breaking life. We accuse you of ineptness in handling her affairs because whenever she is brought before the clan council, you form ineffective committees to study the matter and in the end nothing is done to right the wrongs. You never use your prerogatives to over-rule the discordant committees. In each case, we see the overwhelming astral power in action. So we have decided to abandon the clan and found a settlement where we can observe the culture and traditions of our forebears."

"Yes, a *Sango* chief," Mesumbe the son of late *Sango* Nzegge stepped in. "To cut a long story short, let us review Ntube's transgressions. She became the first Bakossi girl who flouted a Bakossi boy who had betrothed and taken care of her from childhood and got married to a stranger. Her mother reacted to that ungratefulness, by refusing to take her bride-price and cursing her. After years of interventions by the concerned population, she was forced to accept the marriage. On the day Ntube's 'foreign' husbands came to pay

the bride price; their lorries destroyed The-Brook-of-the-Serpent. That was of course an abomination that required an elaborate cleansing. Although *Nyango* Emade, Ntube's mother had been forced to defuse her curse by cleansing her, The-Brook-of-the-Serpent abomination clung on her. It needed another cleansing; an elaborate and expensive cleansing. Ntube and her mother were unable to provide the ritual items demanded for the cleansing. The clan then stepped in and provided the things. But, Ntube refused the cleansing on her grounds; and so in anger, the clan abandoned the sacred objects in this grove. When later on Ntube was asked to sponsor a rite for the disposal of the things, she refused. In the course of time, the things were stolen – another abomination. In her impudence, she migrated to the Mission. When she returned from the Mission, she destroyed the original grove of Atieg behind her father's house. She felled the *buma* tree – the habitat of the doubles of our patriots. Within a short time, we lost most of our elderly population because of the destruction of the habitat of their spirit doubles. Agreed, Ntube has brought us the bridge. But, but that she took onto herself to sell the sand and stones we carried and decided to tell us her illegal transaction after the inauguration is in itself, an abomination. And when even after that we demanded that she gives us a bit of the money she refused. You paramount chief, with the complacency of the chief of Atieg, in complete disregard of the sentiments of your people, unilaterally absolved Ntube of her crimes, cleansed her, made us passive accomplices in the act, and gave her the guts to transcend her femaleness. You, you paramount chief and the chief of Atieg, you asked Ntube to strike the last nail on the coffin of our culture and tradition. You gave her the audacity to take the sacred gourd of palm wine and cola nut, and raise them for the clans of Asome-

Ngoe, in the presence of the administration of Cameroon to bless her. Oh chief!”

Mesumbe ended his speech abruptly with an exclamation that had the ramifications of contempt. Many people thought he had overstepped his bounds. That drew prolonged silence.

Ntube caught a stray glance from the paramount chief and thinking he had given her the floor, stood up to address the meeting.

Chapter Forty Three

“People of Mbuogmut, I believe we are scraping old scars once more. I would not have loved a renewed scraping of them again, but I remember my mother saying that, so long as the child keeps crying, the babysitter must keep singing the lullaby. While accepting to ride the swing with you once more, I shall want us to be conscious of several things – respect for constituted traditional and administrative authority and respect for the elderly. These are cardinal cultural landmarks in any society. We should also avoid trying to be avengers. I don’t want to see the double of Mesumbe’s father late *Sango* Nzegge in any dealings with me. Mesumbe is the junior brother of my age mate *Mue* Eduke. If I accept to come here to discuss with you, it is not because my life is so degraded that I am helpless. Let me therefore remind each and every one of us here, that I was once the wife of a Senior Divisional Officer in Buea. I am not threatening anybody but I want to say that Buea is still in the hollow of my hands.

Now, to come to our concerns, I consider what Mesumbe has said; asking and answering the question. He has asked and answered the question in that; he said I broke the stereotype tradition of Bakossi girls marrying only Bakossi boys and that that earned me a curse from my mother. There are only two ways by which Bakossi people kill criminals – physical elimination with a weapon and spiritual elimination through the forces of witchcraft. Cursing is one of the ways of eliminating through the forces of witchcraft. So, by cursing me, my mother wished to eliminate me through the powers of witchcraft. And as you all can attest, the forces, so to speak, emitted on me untold sufferings – difficult

pregnancies, stillbirths, illnesses and in the end divorce. This holds true with the same forces solicited by the clan for the Brook-of-the-Serpent abomination and any other abomination. In spite of the torture, the forces spared my physical life, I would say for a purpose. What I can't say with certainty is the degree of influence my mother and the clan had over the forces. If I accepted my mother's cleansing it was because at that time I still nursed hopes of recovery. I refused the clan's cleansing because at that time to me, irreparable damage had been done – I had gone beyond recovery and so did not want to owe the clan a grudge for executing what I considered would be an ineffective cleansing. When both my mother and the clan subjected me to those forces, they did not mince their intentions. They went in for the kill and maximized their bitterness, disdain and cruelty in demand and obscurity. My mother's execution of the curse is proverbial and remains indelible in the minds of all who witnessed it. Many consider it a wound that had gone beyond the bone. The same is true with the demands the clan made for my cleansing – white man bone, white man lock of hair, albino bone, thunder, electric fish, water from the male lake, bark of male tree (things impossible to obtain). But there is one thing; the person who throws Daniel into the lion's den may have authority over Daniel but not over the lions. And so I believe that my mother and the clan staked their wishes on forces they could not influence beyond wishful thinking.

And so, to me right now, the forces have taunted them by not only restoring my health but by also giving me a child at this advanced age. In other words, the forces have absolved me of whatever crime I was accused of. They have cleared me of ill-wills, blackmail and unjustified punishments. What then did you want the paramount chief to do – befoul

what the forces had exonerated and sanctified? I believe the paramount chief and the chief of Atieg and any other person, known and unknown that did what you condemn was simply in the sway of what the forces had ordained. And of course, nobody has power over the forces.

You therefore see that the problem is not with the paramount chief, the chief of Atieg nor with me but with you. The problem is with you. The problem is with you because you want to influence what cannot be influenced. And in your characteristic erratic approach, you migrated. Your migration is defiance and is tantamount to saying that if the forces do not work in conformity with your wishes, then they cease to be your forces and so you abandon them by migrating. But let me tell you without mincing words, you migrated on the wrong premise. Now that you have migrated on the wrong premise why, I want to find out how you migrated. Let's put our heads together and x-ray your problem. You have migrated. Yes. But how have you migrated? The problem is no longer why, but how you migrated? I am insisting on this because I find you working on two wrongs. And of course, two wrongs do not make a right. How have you migrated? That is the problem."

"*A Ntube*," *Sango* Ekime addressed The-Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, "you see, our people say, a spear thrown in ignorance is like one launched in anger. It misses its target. I believe the immigrants threw their spear in ignorance. And from what you have said, they now see that they were completely ignorant of what you have explained. This is reflected in the prolonged and tantalizing silence. The truth of what you have said has thrust a dagger in us. It's more than five minutes since you ended your response. Nobody has put up their hand. So let's take it that we all have accepted the mistake. I am speaking as an individual. I do not

seem to understand why you want to know how the immigrants migrated. Those I happened to talk to told me that when they were planning to migrate, they went to Ngombku and asked their respective landlords to show them pieces of land on which to build because they wanted to migrate from their clan. The landlords showed them land and they built. The immigrants migrated in two ways – those who demolished their houses and carried everything to the settlement in one go and have never set foot on Atieg again, and those who piecemealed their migration into stages – building and moving property gradually to the settlement. That is how I know they migrated.”

“Is that what you call migrating? That is not migration. That is camping. Because they migrated on the wrong premise they did not give how to migrate serious thought. I want somebody else to tell us how they migrated. If we don’t examine how they migrated thoroughly we may see them migrating again. And what does the English man say about that? He says, “A rolling stone gathers no moss.” If all who have migrated do not know how they have migrated, I would ask the paramount chief to call them to order and ask them to return,” Ntube said.

The assembly sat dumfounded for a long time. Then Mesumbe stood up and said, “Before I migrated, I went and saw *Sango* Ebong Mechame of Ngomboku and asked him to sell me a piece of land on which to build. He showed me a piece of land and we agreed that I shall pay him thirty thousand francs for it. I gave him fifteen thousand advance and we made a receipt. I promised him ten thousand on the next Ngomboku market day, two days from now.”

“Who else has something to say? Has any other person made the move Mesumbe made?” Ntube asked.

“We wanted land to build on. The Ngomboku people were kind and gave us land to build on. None of us has bought land there. I am surprised to hear *Mue* Mesumbe say that he is in the process of buying land,” Kole said.

“Then only one person has migrated and that is Mesumbe. Those of you who think you can migrate on charity land are like a person sleeping on a borrowed mat. Whenever the owner wants his mat, the person is forced to sleep on the ground. So what do we do now?” Ntube asked.

“Let us ask the immigrants to return to their respective villages. Why should they migrate when we have so much land here? Look, their migration has left most compounds in our villages overgrown and given Ngomboku a facelift. Our villages now look like farm camps.” Pele said.

“I can’t afford to lose my people to the Muetan clan. They should all return,” the paramount chief and the chief of Atieg said almost simultaneously.

The assembly fell silent again for a long time as the people brainstormed on what to do.

“*Sango* paramount chief,” Ntube addressed the paramount chief, “well-intentioned migrations are not bad. Although this one cannot be called well-intentioned, I see some silver lining in it. Once the immigrants buy the land, they will increase the land surface of our clan to the main road. They will create a permanent buffer zone from the bridge to the main road. You see, that section of the road has always been a thorn in our flesh. The Ngomboku people who own it are never enthusiastic in clearing it because they have nothing at stake – it serves them virtually no purpose. Time and again, it is we who are forced to clear it for our convenience. Whenever we complain they rebuff us, calling us bush-men. If we buy the land, it would belong to us and we shall keep it as clean as we do ours. The bridge would

cease being the boundary between the Mbougmut and Muetan clans; it will be in the middle of Atieg village. So I beg your indulgence, suspend this meeting for awhile. Give a break of about one hour. I'll be back soon."

Saying that, Ntube dashed out, called Etame and Esole and they went to the Mission. Before long, they returned with heavy envelopes. Ntube placed the money on the table and the meeting started again. "I ran to the Mission to take some of the money we had saved with the Rev. Father. I suggest that we buy the land indirectly through our immigrants. That is, we work behind the screen by helping our people buy the land. We should not pose as a clan buying land from another clan. That would ring a bell in the Muetan people and make them reject the deal. We should give the immigrants the money to negotiate on individual basis. Ngomboku market day is two days away. The immigrants should carry out the transactions tomorrow when the people will be in dire need of money. Once they flash money to the needy landlords, they will accept to sell. And once our people acquire the land on both sides of the road from the bridge to the main road, the river would cease to be the boundary between two clans. It will be in the middle of Atieg village and that is what I call increasing the land surface of our clan."

"*Wooooooooooooooooo!*" The assembly gave a thunderous applause and burst into singing and dancing. Some immigrants dashed forth to carry Ntube shoulder high. "Take it coolly," she cautioned them. "You shouldn't rush into jubilation. We are still at the stage of making strategies to buy the land. We have not yet bought; so, we can't start celebrating victory."

After saying that, she asked the chiefs to give out the money and commission the immigrants to execute the purchases. She then turned to the people who had wanted to

carry her and soothed them, “We shall have days of celebrations once we succeed in buying the land.”

After the chiefs had given each immigrant thirty thousand francs, the meeting was adjourned to the day of stocktaking.

Mesumbe’s eyes flashed strange admiration for Ntube as he received his money from the paramount chief. He had promised his landlord ten thousand on the market day but as of that time, he did not know where he would get the money. On receiving the money, he made the sign of the cross and shamefacedly smiled.

Chapter Forty Four

Three days after the market day, the paramount chief called a stocktaking meeting. Each immigrant gave an account with proven documents that the deal was done.

“Yes, you have shown proof that you have bought the land. But the buying is not complete. Each of you should offer your landlord/landlady an animal whose blood would be spilt to consummate the purchase. Cash alone does not buy land,” Ntube advised.

“O *a* Ntube! nothing deceives you. Land purchase is like marriage. Money alone does not consummate it. There should be a ritual bond for it to be complete,” *Sango Ehinchome* remarked.

“Thank you *Seb Ehinchome*. Let us all know that this land purchase is unique. It is unique in that, a clan has bought another clan’s land. That is in violation of brotherly relationship. Although we have disguised it, we have to consummate it. We have to spill the blood of a ‘state’ animal – a cow,” Ntube explained.

“Yes, *A* Ntube, you are right. When do we do that?” the chief of *Atieg* asked.

“As soon as every immigrant carries out his individual obligation. Dogs don’t eat cold excrement. Let’s not prolong the project. Let’s do it as soon as possible. It therefore means that we give the immigrants a fixed date when they should honour the obligation. We have eased their problem by giving them money. They should show their commitment by providing the animals,” Ntube responded.

The meeting gave the immigrants ten days and the clan two days after the immigrants, to carry out the projects respectively.

“Two days is too short a time for us to carry out our part of the deal. I see us in the grip of an elaborate feast – as elaborate as that of the inauguration of the bridge. To me, it would even be greater. Can you imagine that from now on, when we alight from a vehicle on the main road we are on land that belongs to us; we are in Mbuogmut?” Ntube asked with raised hands, her voice vibrating with emotions. “Yes, we are in Mbuogmut! We are in Mbuogmut, and we can stroll from there to whatever village of our clan we are going to, without molestation from people who once provoked us – calling us over-side people? So, we should be prepared to celebrate in pomp. The world should know that a new map has been drawn. We still have four million francs with the Rev. Father. Inasmuch as I don’t advocate that we use all the money in feasting, I would suggest that we use one million for the feast. The type of feast I envisage will cost more than one million. So, if you agree with me, we shall beef it up with individual contributions.” she added.

“*Wo A* Ntube!” *Sango* Nkwelle exclaimed. “*A* Ntube, you have once again removed the mass of glop, the cataract that impairs our vision. I have one ram in my stable. Send for it for that day. If I die before that day, I shall tell our ancestors that at last, Mbuogmut is disenclaved.”

“I have two fowls incubating. I won’t mind if they are taken for the occasion,” *Nyango* Diele the mother of the first immigrant pledged.

Nyango Diele’s widow’s mite opened the floor for the bonanza. Even children pledged to donate something. With the envisaged abundance, the assembly brainstormed on where, when, how and by whom the things would be

handled. Tempers flared as some people, especially those of Ekenzu suggested that all the things should be taken to Ekenzu because Ekenzu was the head-village of the clan. Others thought the things should be taken to Atieg because the new acquisition was part of Atieg. And others suggested that the things should be taken to the new settlement which would be the site of the occasion.

“People of Mbuogmut,” Ntube addressed the assembly. “We have had a similar occasion. You saw how we organized it. Why are we splitting knobby wood now? Let each village gather its donations, divide them into two, send a small portion to the new settlement for central cooking and the bigger portion, have it prepared in the village. On the day of the feast, I shall send a vehicle round to bring down the women from the hinterland to the bridge from where they all will move in a procession to the new settlement. That will not only give the occasion a clan outlook, it will also decongest the new settlement,”

“Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python, mother of Mbuogmut, you have done it again, the matter is settled.” the women exulted.

The next problem was how the occasion would be run. Some people thought it would start with the celebration of holy mass and from the church; the Rev. Father would move down and bless the place and after that, traditional manifestations would take over. Others thought it should be a purely traditional feast with libation and the giving of the sacred wine and cola nut to deserving people taking precedence.

“We are holding the occasion in order to introduce the spirits of our ancestors to the new acquisition and to announce to them that very soon; their sons and daughters who have migrated would start being buried on land that was

not originally theirs. And so, they should not be surprised when the immigrants call their names in the new environment during libations. They should be ready to attend such manifestations in the new place, and finally to ask them to bless the immigrants and their well-wishers in the new place. So, I hold strongly that the event should be purely traditional. The Ngomboku people may also have something to add,” Ebune suggested.

In accepting Ebune’s suggestion the paramount chief asked whether the assembly had another point to discuss.

“*Sango* paramount chief, each village chief should give you the name of the person or persons he would want to receive the sacred wine and cola nut and the name of the person who will offer the things. Last time during the inauguration, people were disgruntled because the wine and cola nut were given to wrong people, and because there wasn’t strict adherence to tradition. Both the receiver and the giver must rehearse the procedure of giving and taking,” Ntongwe advised.

“The paramount chief thought for awhile and said, “OK, let’s follow this order – chief of Kodmin, Ngolo, Muabag, Ekenzu and Atieg.” With that, each of the chiefs gave the names of two young men and two elderly men who would receive and give the things respectively. Only the chief of Atieg gave the name of a young man and a woman, the woman being Ntube Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. Each chief justified his choice. The assembly agreed unanimously and called on *Sango* Elondo to explain the procedure.

Before *Sango* Elondo got up to explain, Ntube dashed forth and raised her hands while struggling to clear her voice.

“People of Mbuogmut, I believe we are dancing the Bamenda dance once more – a dance characterized by a click,

a misstep and a whirl back to square one. I seem to decipher a sinister intent to circumvent the ordained path of the forces you want to employ to consummate the sanctity of this occasion. What is the purpose of libation and the giving and receiving of the sacred *pid* and cola nuts? Should I be the one to tell you? And if you know that it is to bless the receivers on behalf of the community for greater exploits would it be wise for you to sidestep the substratum on which this occasion is built? I say this because in your choice of givers and receivers of the sacred *pid* and cola nuts, you have forgotten that it is the woman who is the epicentre of this occasion. And if I am right, don't you think that if we respect the list you have made you will be moving on parallel lines with your ancestors? Paramount chief and people of Mbuogmut; for how long have men been pouring libations in this clan? Obviously from the founding of the clan. Where has that taken them to? What milestone can they proudly show they have put in place? If I should say that it is because they have failed to read the minds of their ancestors, that their libations have yielded nothing up to this point, then I would suggest that they make a U turn in this occasion. The ancestors have unequivocally rejected their one-sided pouring of libation. If they have not; let somebody counter with genuine proofs. So, I believe our best bet is that we make a total overhaul of the lists and leaders of the occasion. There should be equal representation in every aspect of it. Our people say, he who brings the boat to the shore is held in high esteem. Are you sure you are holding the person who brought this boat to the shore in high esteem by this flagrant disregard?"

Two elderly men farted as the meaning of what Ntube said rent their brains. The place went dead. The paramount chief shut his eyes in meditation for a long time. When he opened them, he said, "People of Mbuogmut, we have hit an

ugly and knotty tangle which must be disentangled if we want to continue with preparations for the feast. Although our people say, don't run away from the elephant because it has no fangs, I would advise that we don't take that at face value. I know most of you have not understood what Ntube has said. Ntube wants us to include women in every aspect of the celebrations. Do you know what total overhaul means? So, I throw the floor open. Let each and every one of us express themselves so that our concerted decision should not be labelled the chief's unilateral decision."

Ndille put up his hand and took the floor.

"Yes, paramount chief. We don't light a candle to look for the truth. I just want to streamline my thinking with that of The-Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python. I believe she is right. If we judge well, we shall see that everything we are in for, revolves around her in particular and women in general. I remember during the pouring of libation at the displacement of the crocodile ceremony, *Seb* Ntioge said, the cocks have overslept and so the hens have crowed. And because of that, the clan was expecting a new dawn. The new dawn is what Ntube is talking about. So, to me, let the women be made to pour libation and give and take the sacred *pid* and cola nuts. What we need is development."

"Yes, Mesumbe. Your hand is up." The paramount chief gave the floor to Mesumbe.

"*Pab* chief, I don't think it is good for us to waste time. I support *Mue* Etone. We all agree with him."

"Has anybody else something to say? I repeat, I don't want a situation in which people will say I took a unilateral decision. I want to seek every person's opinion." the paramount chief said.

The two elderly men who had farted went out and conferred together. "*A mue* Ndel'," *Sango* Esembe addressed

Sango Ndele. “‘My breasts have fallen’. The world is leaking. Death is better. What complacency! What daft! Am I dreaming? Don’t you think the paramount chief is making a gross mistake in putting a Muankum prerogative to public debate? What shall I tell the lions that left this land when I join them; that I left women-men ruling their clan? I prefer to die than live to hear that women pour libation. How will they sit in pouring libation? What voice will they use to make the forest and the mountains tremble? And that is not all, suppose after pouring libation the woman commands her husband to lie behind the bed, what will the world become?”

“*A mue*,” *Sango* Ndele responded. “If a flood seizes your walking stick, know you are drowning. Ntube has seized the walking stick of the clan and the clan is drowning. As we are now, we can’t do much. If we oppose, we’ll be depriving ourselves of the little we can gain from the mess. So, let’s return and listen to the tomfoolery. Whatever they do will affect them not us. How long shall we live again? When they give us our little food and drink, we take. That is what we should live for now. We should not develop undue tension on what is happening.”

The two returned with stony faces and sat down to listen to the paramount chief. “*A Sango Ndel’*,” the paramount chief called. “We have been waiting for the two of you to return before we proceed. If you have something to say, go on before I say anything.

“We went out to urinate not to confer,” *Sango* Ndele responded.

“OK, if no other person has something to say, then I would say we go by the consensus. Each chief will therefore revise his list.”

The chiefs revised their lists by adding the names of women. After crosschecking the lists to the satisfaction of

everybody the paramount chief assigned roles to the men and women who would officiate, the most prominent being the role of the chief enchanter of the libation prayer on the day of celebrations. Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python was chosen the main enchanter. *Nyango* Ebane, *Nyango* Eloé, *Nyango* Nneh and *Nyango* Mbinze were chosen to give the sacred *pid* and cola nuts to the chosen young men. On the men's side, the chiefs were chosen to give the sacred *pid* and cola nuts to the chosen young women.

The givers were instructed to make short speeches invoking the indulgence of the ancestors and asking them to bless the receivers and the community at large. The receivers on their part were told to simply take the things from the ground and raise them for communal blessing. The aspect of the woman placing her hands on the head of the male giver and running her hands down from his head to the hands and taking the things was thus suppressed. After those modifications, the meeting ended with slight entertainment.

Chapter Forty Five

Bororo herdsmen from Muanenguba brought the bull Ntube had sent for, two days before the occasion and tethered it at the big field. To give it ample grazing space, they made the rope long and loose on the trunk of the tree to which they tied it. With that the cow could move round and round without entangling itself. The mammoth bull went wild when the rest of the herd drove away leaving it behind. It attacked any person who tried to get nearby. This did not worry the natives until the next day when they found out that they could not get close enough to the cow to kill it. It was imperative for them to kill it in the early evening for the women to do the cooking overnight; but by late evening all their attempts failed. Somebody then suggested that the cow should be shot. Shooting required a marksman and a good gun. Only Ntube had such a gun. Only Ntube was an attested markswoman.

“Let’s go and tell Ntube to come and shoot the cow,” Epie suggested.

“If we go and call her, we should be prepared to do the cooking. A woman cannot kill for women to cook. In whose land have you heard that women kill for women to cook? If she kills, we cook,” Ngwene snapped.

“If she will not kill, you kill. Time is running out. Can we butcher this bull in the night? It is getting too late,” Eseh rebuffed and dashed to call Ntube. When she arrived with the gun, she laughed and said, “I can’t waste my gun powder on a cow I can kill singlehandedly. Get a red piece of cloth. Etame go over there out of the reach of the cow and wave the cloth at it. It will attack but would stand when the rope restrains it. When that happens, Njume you pin a pole by the tree to

which it is tied. After pinning the pole Etame should move round the tree waving the cloth at the cow. It would follow him. Once the rope touches the pole the loose end will tangle. Once the end is fixed the cow would in the process of chasing the cloth round and round entangle itself until it will be unable to move anymore. Then you walk leisurely to it and cut the tendons of its hind legs and that is it. Simple.”

Njume and Etame did as they were instructed and to the admiration of the boys, they saw the bull entangling itself onto the tree until its neck got stuck to the trunk and it could move no more. It made a desperate attempt to free itself and that led to a suffocating tightening of the rope on its neck. With the loss of more than 60% of its breathing capacity, it farted, its eyes bulged, its tongue dangled out, it slobbered and moaned in agony. Some mystical force exploded in Ntube. She hissed like a teased cobra, took the cutlass from Etame and was about to rush to cut the tendons when another force told her to take it easy. She thus moved to the bull in grand style, raised the cutlass and with the leisure of a tailor cut its hind tendons as one trims a broom. The hind-legs buckled and the bull squatted. Njume and Eseh then tied its forelegs together and called the other boys to help drag. One single pull and it fell sideways. The boys then tied the forelegs and the hind ones together, loosened the rope on the neck and fixed the head for the killing. When Ngwene saw Ntube at the brink of going to cut its throat, he seized the cutlass from her. “Let me do it. It is going to splash blood on you,” he said with a series of suppressed clucks. He moved to the cow and with one sinister, concentrated and revengeful stroke, slit the throat almost half way into the neck. The bull twitched several times and eased out.

“Call the elders. Let them butcher the cow fast. Women are getting impatient,” Ntube instructed and moved away. As

she moved away, Eseh puckered his face provocatively at Ngwene and asked, "Is that what you will go chest-pounding yourself tomorrow that you killed the cow?"

"That's what I will tell your mother, idiot," Ngwene responded threateningly.

The elders butchered the cow and gave the Ngomboku people their ritual share consisting of a foreleg, the hip and some entrails. The rest, they shared to the villages of the clan. The women cooked all night long. In the morning Ntube sent a vehicle to collect the hinterland people to the bridge from where they moved in procession singing and dancing to the ceremonial grounds.

The guests had arrived early and had been seated. Immediately the procession arrived, the occasion started. The paramount chief announced the chief celebrant. Ntube, Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python stepped forth in nondescript regalia. Though it was reminiscent of that of *behon*, it had a feminine outlook which made it unique. Instead of a red cap with a loose drooping dome, she wore a red head-tie, and adjusted her overflowing *kaba* with a red waistband; on her left shoulder she carried her late father's *ngwem* – a bag that can best be described as an armpit bag because its strip is so short that its mouth is closed by the armpit. In the bag she had a newly bought *pid*, the broom of peace, some cola nuts and cola nut pepper. In her right hand she carried her late father's staff of peace.

The paramount chief led her to where the calabash of palm wine and cola nuts were put and showed her the stool. She pinned her staff of peace on the ground, got the broom of peace from the bag, lashed it in the air thrice, and exclaimed, "*A beiiiiiiiiii, A beiiiiiiiiii, yu!*" the stunned audience responded from habit, "*Ya.*" She repeated this twice and intoned a song:

Solo: *Ya, ya, ya, ya*, Matriarchs this is your land,

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: Patriarchs this is your land

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: If you want to spoil it spoil it

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: If you want to repair it repair it

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: *Yeee*, this is your land

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: *Yeee*, this is your land

Chorus: *Ya ya*

Solo: I stand for construction'

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: Who stands for destruction?

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: Ancestors stand for construction

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: They have approved what I'm saying

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

Solo: *Heii mbuog nye ne*

Chorus: *Ya, ya*

A beiiii, A beiiii, A beiiii yu! Ntube yelled

Ya, the Audience responded.

After that awe-inspiring song the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python sat down. She sat astride, and adjusted her overflowing *kaba* to cover her legs right to the toes. Then she ordered that the calabash of wine and the cola nuts be inspected to ascertain that the ancestors had drunk and eaten their share. "*Wowo!*" the paramount chief exclaimed, they nearly finished it." Then she drew the calabash and positioned it between her legs. She ran her hands on the

calabash and raised them for the assembly to bless. Then she took the leaf-cock and started shuttling it in the mouth of the calabash as she chanted:

O wine *eeee*

Lower and upper Bakossi *eeee*
Have met here today *eeee*
To bear witness *eeee*
And affirm *eeee*
A new relationship *eeee*
Between the Mbuogmut and Muetan clans *eeee*
Between Ngomboku and Atieg people *eeee*
That is why *eeee*
We are using you *eeee*
As a medium of contact *eeee*
Between us and our ancestors *eeee*
So that what we say and do *eeee*
Should reflect what they say and do *eeee*
So that, that union of thought and action *eeee*
Can yield more fruits *eeee*
For a better tomorrow *eeee*

O wine *eeee*

As every river-crossing has a name *eeee*
So does this occasion *eeee*
And the name is the children of Asomengoe *eeee*
Etan' ne Sundem, male and female *eeee*
Nyo ne Etug', male and female *eeee*
Mbuogmut, male and female *eeee*
We invite them *eeee*
To lead all guest ancestors of good will *eeee*
To this occasion *eeee*
When they are coming *eeee*

Let them bring all the good things of life *eeee*
Fertility in people, animals and crops *eeee*
So that the land overflows in abundance
And whether a stranger stubs the good foot or not
They should meet the leftover of food *eeee*
And eat to satisfaction *eeee*

O wine *eeee*

We are here today *eeee*
To cement a new relationship *eeee*
Between Ngomboku people *eeee*
And Atieg people *eeee*
So that *eeee*
As they lived in harmony *eeee*
When the river separated them *eeee*
They should do the same *eeee*
Now that the bridge and migration unite them *eeee*
As the right hand washes the left *eeee*
So should the left wash the right *eeee*
Things do resemble *eeee*
Fowl and partridge *eeee*
Snake and worm *eeee*
Salt and wood ash *eeee*
Yet in that resemblance *eeee*
Each retains its identity *eeee*

O wine *eeee*

When a fishing rite *eeee*
Does not lead to a large catch *eeee*
It should be reformed *eeee*
Into a more productive one *eeee*
A single hand does not tie a bundle *eeee*
So, let the footprints of men be interlaced *eeee*

With those of women *eeee*
So that when the man hunts the buffalo *eeee*
The woman should fish the tadpole *eeee*
And with that *eeee*
No house will lack food *eeee*

O wine *eeee*

If what we say and do here *eeee*
Does not please some people *eeee*
And they want to sabotage it *eeee*
Let them face up when we face down *eeee*
And face down when we face up *eeee*
Let there be no storms when we plant *eeee*
Let the fowls of our land *eeee*
Hatch eight chickens *eeee*
For two hens and two cocks *eeee*
To be meant for food *eeee*
And two hens and two cocks *eeee*
To procreate *eeee*
So that there is no vacuum *eeee*
O mimeeee
Osung ongwe, o ngwe ngwe
Ntube: *A heiiiii, heiiiii, A heiiiii Yu!*
Audience: *Ya*

Ntube ended the chant and threw down the leaf-cork. The paramount chief then asked those who were appointed to divine with cola nuts to do so. All the ten cola nuts thrown on the ground were positive. Ntube then filled ten *pid* and the paramount chief placed a lobe of cola nut by each of the *pid* and called out the five male and five female givers and recipients respectively. Each giver made a short speech saying why the recipient was chosen and wished that the ancestors

blessed them. Each recipient then took the cola nut and *pid* and asked the assembly to bless them. After all had done so, Ntube-Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python filled her *pid*, and asked for special blessing. The assembly gave her a standing ovation. Women jumped at her, hugged her, sang her praise names and ululated.

Chapter Forty Six

The feasting that followed the pouring of libation was proverbial. The weather was good, the food excellent and the people very civil. While they feasted they appreciated Ntube's chant.

"*A mue*," *Sango* Ndele addressed his friend, *Sango* Esemé. "I am tongue-tied. Did you hear Ntube's chant? It has broken all conventions. In calling our ancestors she called Etan ne Sundem, Nyo ne Etug, and Mbuogmut and in each case added, male and female to emphasize that it was not only the man, but also the woman who founded the clan. In mentioning the new relationship between Ngomboku people and the Atieg people she said things resemble but in the resemblance each maintains its identity. In referring to people with diverse opinions she did not wish them dead. I have never heard such wisdom. That child is like spittle. You can't spit all. You must swallow most of it."

"*A mue* Ndel'," *Sango* Esemé responded. "A leaf that would fall from the tree, falls whether there is a storm or not. I feel so guilty for whatever ill-will we have manifested on Ntube. See how happy people are. It is already past midnight and even people of the hinterland are still enjoying themselves. If I had courage I would confess to her for all the throat-cutting I carried out against her – going to witch doctors to kill her."

"*A mue*, let's sigh and thank God that that did not happen. I have never feasted like this before. Everything is so agreeable!"

Before *Sango* Esemé responded, the paramount chief announced that his people should get ready to return. "It is getting to morning. People of substance are never carried

away by abundance. Let the Ekenzu people and people of the hinterland return. But before they return, I shall ask the Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python to say a word to her people.”

“Thank you paramount chief,” Ntube responded. “People of Mbuogmut, our respectable guests, I am so elated by your response to this occasion and yourself composure throughout the manifestations. I have observed with keen interest the way you have enjoyed yourselves. I believe each of you has something positive about this come together. It would not have happened if the immigrants did not migrate. Their migration broke our conventions: It challenged the unity of our clan and put us to test, so we were angry with them.

Suppose in that anger we had killed them we would not have been feasting today. Can you imagine what that breach of convention has achieved? Can you value it? Let me tell you that only conquest by war would have achieved what the immigrants have achieved. Do you now see that you were wrong in wishing me dead because I had broken your culture and traditions by marrying a non-Bakossi man, making lorries trace your road, destroying bat infested forests, felling hollow and therefore dangerous trees, displacing the crocodile and finally keeping for you the money which has made this day possible? Let each and every one of us therefore X-ray ourselves and confess to ourselves for any retardatory action we had ignorantly taken against one another and pray for a new great day. I believe that day is now dawning. Good morning.”

“*Kokowikooooo!*” the cock crew.

*"A well conceived and
structured novel:
interesting reading,"*

KASHIM IBRAHIM TALA,
*Emeritus Professor of Literature and Ecoculture,
University of Buea, Cameroon*

In She Seized The Balls, Ntube's exploits can best be described as guided by the hand of providence. In a bid to inherit her father's compound and live comfortably, she destroys the old sacred village grove and fells totemic trees. An epidemic breaks out, killing mostly the elderly. Ntube is accused of causing it because of the destruction of the sacred places. She is brought before the clan council several times but she tantalizes the council with her flawless defences. In due course, she rebuffs her former husband's bid for reconciliation; falls in love with an influential personality and begets a child with him. She uses the man to achieve the building of a bridge across the river that had enclaved the clan for centuries. With her elevated status among her people she becomes the first woman to be given the prerogative to pour libation in a patriarchal society.

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